

# interzone

MARCH 1999

Number 141

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## 'Hunting the Slarque'

Eric Brown

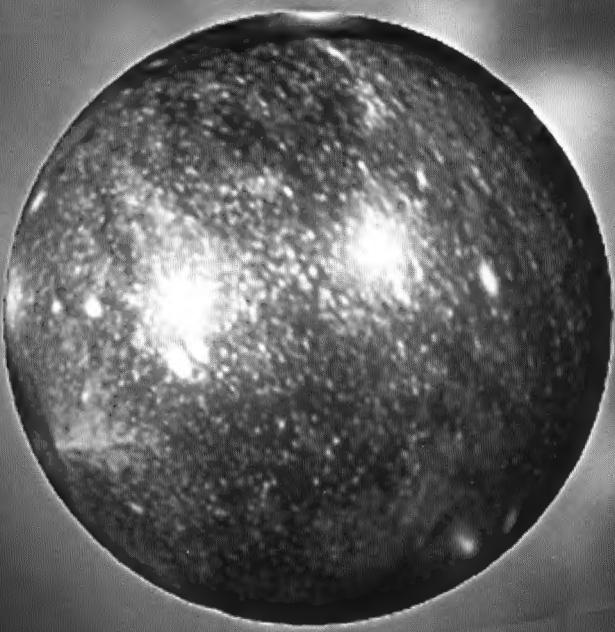


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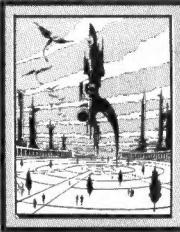


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# interzone

science fiction & fantasy

MARCH 1999

Number 141

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## Interzone 1998

### Popularity Poll

This is the March 1999 issue, mailed in mid-February. Over the coming weeks, we'd be grateful if readers could consider rating the past year's stories. Let us know your thoughts on the contents of issues 127 to 138 inclusive (no need to wait until you've read the latest two issues, and the present one, as they will count towards next year's poll).

We'd appreciate it if readers (especially those who are renewing their subscriptions) could send us answers to the following questions. Just write or type your replies on any piece of paper and send them to us before the deadline of **30th April 1999**. We'll report the results later in the year.

- 1) Which stories in *Interzone* issues 127-138 inclusive (i.e. those with a 1998 cover date) did you particularly like?
- 2) Which stories in *Interzone* issues 127-138 inclusive did you particularly dislike (if any)?

Any further comments about the magazine, including its non-fiction and artwork, would also be most welcome.

**Editor:** The following exchange appeared in the letter column of the November 1933 issue of Hugo Gernsback's science-fiction magazine *Wonder Stories*. Since it has gained in relevance with the passage of nearly 66 years, we thought it worth reprinting:

Editor, *Wonder Stories*:

Could you please tell me whether the twentieth century ends on December 31, 1999, at 12:00 p.m., or December 31, 2000, at 12:00 p.m. I desire to know because it is an important factor in a story that I am writing.

Paul J. Sykes,  
President, Science Study Club,  
Vancouver, B.C.

(Since the first century, A.D., began with Jan. 1, of the year 1, it ended with December 31, of the year 100, consequently the twentieth century will end with December 31, of the year 2000, at midnight – unless the calendar shall undergo some unforeseen reform... – EDITOR.)

**Editor:** So there! (And Arthur C. Clarke has often told us this too.) Perhaps we'd do best to regard the forthcoming New Year's celebrations as marking the beginning of the "Millennial Year" – i.e. the last year of the old millennium, a sort of 12-month jamboree leading up to the true beginning of the 21st century and the new millennium, on 1st January 2001.

### Moorcock Visit!

"An opportunity to discover more about one of Britain's legendary sf/fantasy writers and editors – **Michael Moorcock**, who currently lives in Texas but will be visiting London. David Pringle (editor, *Interzone*) will chair a question-and-answer session with Michael

Moorcock, at **7pm on Thursday**

**25th March 1999.** No door charge – open to all. Come in droves! Venue: Dulwich Library Hall, 1st Floor, 368 Lordship Lane, London SE22. Buses 40, 176, 185, 312. Nearest British Rail stations East Dulwich and Forest Hill."

### Geoff Ryman Everywhere

Geoff Ryman's story "Everywhere" (last issue, *Interzone* 140) was, as we stated, "commissioned by Artists Agency for the *Visions of Utopia* project, which brought together artists and communities throughout the North of England to consider visions of the future." Those interested in more information about the *Visions of Utopia* project are welcome to e-mail [utopia@artab.demon.co.uk](mailto:utopia@artab.demon.co.uk) or telephone 0191-510 9318.

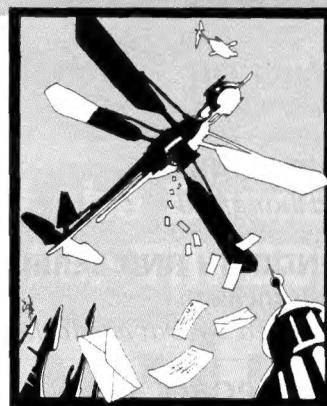
## + INTERFACE +



### Elements

*Interzone* writers Stephen Baxter, Colin Greenland, Lionel Fanthorpe and others will be appearing at "Elements," a "festival of science fact, fiction and phenomena" to be held at Lincoln Central Library on 11th-12th and 18th-19th March 1999. Those interested in further details should phone organizer Maria Lyon – 01522-528753.

## INTERACTION



*By the way, we were saddened to hear of the death, on 11th January 1999, of Britain's oldest writer, Naomi Mitchison (born 1st November 1897), author of Memoirs of a Spacewoman (1962) and other novels. If she had lived another two years, and had died at the age of 103 rather than 101, she would have been a woman of three centuries – the 19th, the 20th and the 21st.*

Dear Editors:

I've let this go for many years but finally feel I have to respond. Neil Jones and Neil McIntosh (issue 138) have reviewed *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* for several years now

and have never liked the book. So why do they insist on reviewing it? How about giving it to someone who enjoys both fantasy and horror and understands the relationships and intersections between the two (and sf, for that matter).

They don't understand why "Residuals" (mis-titled by the reviewers as "Remnants") is in the book. Gee, it's sf. Yup it is. And it's also pretty horrific, in my opinion. That's the point guys. Sf can be horrific and there's no reason why it shouldn't be in a Year's Best horror anthology.

I also feel that fantasy, dark fantasy and horror are all on the same continuum. This is something I've asserted for years and I still feel it's true. It's obvious from every review that the Neils both dislike most fantasy (they admit it) so I repeat, why do they keep reviewing these annual volumes?

Ellen Datlow  
New York

**Editor:** Actually, Ellen, your sixth, seventh and ninth volumes of *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* were reviewed in these pages by Pete Crowther, and he loved them. Neil Jones and Neil McIntosh covered the fifth, tenth and eleventh (Brian Stableford did the eighth). I've discussed the matter with the two Neils, and we've mutually agreed that they won't be reviewing any future books in the series.

Dear Editors:

In Brian Stableford's interesting review of *American SF TV Series of the 1950s* (issue 139) he mentions that the BBC production of *1984* happens to be one of the rare TV productions from that period (the early 1950s) that still exists because the entire cast was reassembled and it was "filmed for posterity." Actually, it was then common practice for those BBC plays to be broadcast live twice. I interviewed Peter Cushing, who starred in *1984*, years ago and he told me what an ordeal it was: "My heavens! You rehearsed three weeks, which is as much as you would do in the theatre, and then gave this 'live' performance, then 3 days passed and you repeated the 'live' performance on the following Thursday. That was a pure form of torture because your nerves carried you through on the first night and you had people ringing you up saying that it was marvellous... so you had to be as good as they thought you were, or try to be better, on the second performance... I was so shaking with nerves."

I was always under the impression that there was a technical reason why they simply couldn't record the first performance and transmit that the second time but in a 1990 issue of *Sight & Sound* there was piece about Rudolph Cartier, who'd produced and directed *1984* and also the *Quatermass* serials, and Cartier said: "This live business had a great deal to do with Equity (the actors' union) who wouldn't let the BBC pre-film anything but out-of-doors scenes." I presume that it was just a lucky break that *1984* happened to get preserved on film – obviously someone at the BBC thought it was worth keeping a record of it. Most of the other BBC-produced drama of that period wasn't as fortunate.

Incidentally, *1984*, broadcast in 1953, was one of the first examples of TV causing an outbreak of moral panic among MPs and in the daily press. According to the *Sight & Sound* piece: "Five Tory MPs tabled a motion deplored 'The tendency evident in recent BBC TV programmes, notably on Sunday evenings, to pander to sexual and sadistic tastes.' The *Daily Mirror* fulminated, 'There was no moral in this nauseating story, which held out no hope for the future that could justify it being shown on television.' The *Daily Express* headline alleged: 'Wife Dies as She Watches,' and the *Daily Sketch* shrieked, 'Tortures on TV Start Biggest Protest Storm.' Nearly 50 years later and the same type of people are being elected as MPs and hired to write for tabloid newspapers. Maybe it's genetic. But the controversy was good for Cushing – it led him to be signed up by Hammer Films.

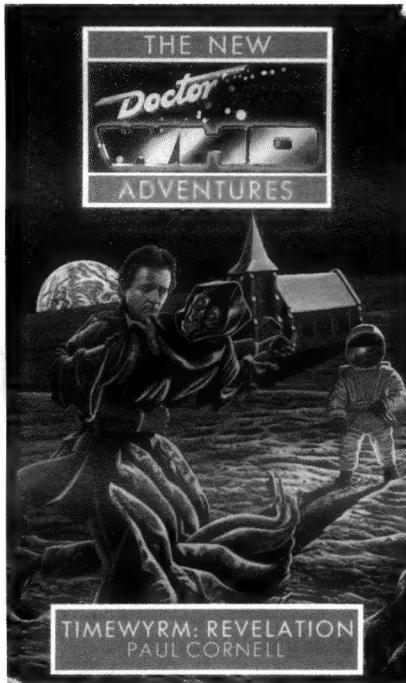
**John Brosnan**

Harrow, Middlesex

Dear Editors:

*Doctor Who* was, as *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* puts it, "a notably self-confident series, juggling expertly with many of the great tropes and images of the genre... probably the best space opera in the history of TV, not excluding *Star Trek*." Some of it, it has to be said, was awful: what separated good stories from bad was an understanding that the appeal of the programme lay in *wit* rather than *slapstick, irony* rather than *flippancy, the Carnivalesque* rather than *pantomime*. Soap opera never came into it. Much *Who* spinoffery to date has missed these points, I'm afraid.

Some writers – Paul Cornell in particular – have packed old monsters, previous Doctors and/or their companions into self-consciously "wacky" stories simply in order to assert their moral and artistic superiority over source material which has long since lost cultural authority or the ability to



shock – this being the basis of "camp," which is to "satire" what rolling a drunk is to boxing. Camp sensibility is the means by which cultural elites appropriate popular material that would otherwise be denied them by their own sense of superiority. Little attempt has been made at recreating the series' strengths – "cognitive estrangement," social satire, mystery, excitement or suspense – since this would require a narrative coherence and psychological insight denied by postmodernism – which is fragmentary, incoherent and depthless by definition. Instead we get the superficial recycling of tropes and smug in-jokes which serve only to demonstrate the authors' possession of "fan capital."

Cornell's claim that it is more "hon-

est" to employ Captain Kirk instead of a stock "ambitious starship captain" is an example of the "you can't sack me, I quit" line of argument used to justify the unoriginality of most spinoffery. Of course sf is a genre of recognition as much as it is of innovation, and *Doctor Who* itself plundered everyone from H. G. Wells to J. G. Ballard: but it also produced much which was new – and while influences were apparent, they were unobtrusive and did not undermine verisimilitude. Where the TV series could put the Doctor into a deerstalker and a fog-bound Victorian street confident of the intertextual competence of the viewers, authors of the "New Adventures" felt the need to add Sherlock Holmes himself. Once unoriginality has been declared "honest" there is no reason for subtlety either.

There is nothing sophisticated about forefronting the artificiality of fiction – *bad fiction* does that as a matter of course – and portraying a fictional world as unreal *confirms* our prejudices rather than challenges them. What separated the metafictions of the TV series (e.g. Robert Holmes's "Carnival of Monsters" and Philip Martin's "Vengeance on Varos") was a concern for political economy. In the books metafiction is depoliticized, a simple matter of highlighting generic conventions while mystifying questions of use and ownership – particularly the fact that *Doctor Who* – once publicly funded and free at the point of reception – has been privatized. Intertextuality then becomes indistinguishable from product placement.

While writers like Jim Mortimore, Paul Leonard, Simon Bucher-Jones, Lawrence Miles and Lance Parkin have made imaginative use of quite complex scientific concepts, the elementary science of most authors is often so appallingly bad that we may assume that is deliberately so. Scientific errors or technobabble which could be excused or ignored in a TV series in which the action carried the story along simply stare back at you from the page, stubbornly refusing to go away. History is treated equally contemptuously: "History is a lie!" the Doctor declares in Cornell's *Goth Opera*. Background research would take up time which could be more profitably spent hammering away at a keyboard churning out another novel; it is appropriate that those who have developed a production-line method of writing share Henry Ford's view of history.

The books usually employ the *Star Trek* approach to "otherness," totally assimilating it or demonizing it. Leonard's *Speed of Flight* features an interesting and sympathetic portrayal of a genuinely alien race, as does Bucher-Jones' *The Death of Art*, but

Concluded on page 26

**H**unter opened his eyes and dimly registered a crystal dome above him. Beyond, he made out a thousand rainbows vaulting through the sky like the architraves of a cathedral ceiling. Below the rainbows, as if supporting them, mile-high trees rose, dwellings of various design lodged within their branches. Large insects (on closer inspection Hunter recognized them as *Vespa vulgaris denebian*) shuttled back and forth between the trees. He guessed he was on Deneb XVII, The-World-of-a-Million-Wonders.

He was on Million? He was *alive*? It was a miracle. Or was this a dream? Was he dying, was this some cruel jest played by his embattled consciousness as he slipped into oblivion? Would this vision soon cease, to be replaced by total nothingness? The concept frightened him, even though he told himself that he had nothing to fear: dead, he would not have the awareness with which to apprehend the terrible fact of his extinction.

Now, however, he had. He tried to scream.

He could not move his mouth. Nor for that matter, he realized, could he move any other part of his body. Come to that, he could feel nothing. He tried to move his head, shift his gaze. He remained staring through the dome at the rainbow sky.

Following his pang of mental turmoil, he seemed to sense his surroundings with greater clarity. The prismatic parabolas overhead struck him like visual blows, and for the first time he made out sound: the strummed music of troubadours, the cool laughter of a waterfall, and muted chatter, as contented crowds promenaded far below.

Such fidelity could not be the product of a dwindling consciousness, surely? But the alternative, that he was indeed alive, was almost as hard to believe.

How could anyone have survived an attack of such ferocity?

In his mind's eye, dimly, like a half-remembered image from a dream, he recalled the attack: claws and teeth and stingers; he had experienced pain both physical – he had been torn savagely limb from limb – and mental, as he had known he was going to die.

And beyond that instant of mental terror?

Where had the attack taken place. How long ago? Had he been alone, or...?

He wanted more than anything to call her name, less to verify the fact of his own existence than to seek assurance of her safety.

"Sam!" But the sound would not form.

He felt his grasp on reality slacken. The colours faded, the sounds ebbed. He fell away, slipped – not into oblivion, as he had feared – but into an ocean of unconscious inhabited by the great dim shapes of half-remembered visions, like basking cetaceans. Hunter dreamed.

At length he felt himself resurface. The rainbows again, the stringed music and babble of water. He still could not shift his vision, not that this overly troubled him. He was more occupied by trying to shuffle into some semblance of order the images revealed in his dream.

He had been on Tartarus Major, he recalled – that great, ancient, smouldering world sentenced to death by the mutinous primary which for millennia had granted

the planet its very life. He had been commissioned to catalogue and holopix Tartarean fauna, much of which had never been registered by the Galactic Zoological Centre, Paris, Earth – in the hope that some of the unique examples of the planet's wildlife might be saved from extinction, removed off-world, before the supernova blew.

He had been with Sam, his wife, his life and joy – Sam, carrying his child. He recalled her warning scream, and he had turned, too late to lift his laser. A charging nightmare: teeth and claws, and pain... Oh, the pain!

And, above everything, Sam's screams.

And his fear, as he died, for Sam's safety.

Now he wanted to sob, but he had not the physical wherewithal to do so; he felt as though his soul was sobbing for what might have become of Sam.

Unconsciousness claimed him, mercifully.

When next he awoke, what seemed like aeons later, the trapezoid lozenges of sky between the cross-hatched rainbows were cerise with sunset, and marked with early stars. The achingly beautiful notes of a musical instrument, perhaps a clariphone, floated up from the thoroughfares below.

He tried to shift his gaze, move his head, but it was impossible. He had absolutely no sensation in any part of his body.

A cold dread surged through his mind like liquid nitrogen.

He had no body – that was the answer. He was but a brain, a pair of eyes. Only that much of him had survived the attack. He was the guinea pig of some diabolical experiment, his eyes fixed forever on the heavens, the stars he would never again visit.

Hunter. He was Hunter. For as long as he recalled, he had gone by that simple appellation. He had roved the stars, hunting down the more bizarre examples of galactic fauna, amassing a vast holo-library, as well as extensive case-notes, that was regarded as invaluable by the legion of zoologists and biologists from Earth to Zigma-Zeta. He was a scholar, an intrepid adventurer *non pareil*. He had often gone where lesser men feared to go, like Tartarus... He wondered how his death had been taken by the galaxy at large, how his friends had mourned, jealous colleagues smiled that at last his need to prove himself had instead proved to be his undoing.

Tartarus, a double danger: to go among beasts unknown, on a world in imminent danger of stellar annihilation. He should have swallowed his pride and left well alone. Instead, he had dragged Sam along with him.

He recalled, with a keening melancholy deep within him like a dying scream, that Sam had tried to talk him out of the trip. He recalled his stubbornness. "I can't be seen to back out now, Samantha."

He recalled her insistence that, if he did make the journey, then she would accompany him. He recalled his smug, self-righteous satisfaction at her decision.

As unconsciousness took him once again, he was aware of a stabbing pain within his heart.

Someone was watching him, peering down at where he was imprisoned. He had no idea how long he had been staring up at the lattice of rainbows, mulling over his

memories and regrets, before he noticed the blue, piercing eyes, the odd bald head at the periphery of his vision.

The man obligingly centred himself in Hunter's line of sight.

He stared at his tormentor, tried to order his outrage. He boiled with anger. *Do you know who I am?* he wanted to ask the man. *I am Hunter, famed and feted the galaxy over! How dare you do this to me!*

Hands braced on knees, the man looked down on him. Something about his foppish appearance sent a shiver of revulsion through Hunter. His captor wore the white cavalier boots of a nobleman, ballooning pantaloons, and a sleeveless overcoat of some snow-white fur. His face was thin, bloodless – almost as pale as his vestments.

He reminded Hunter of an albino wasp: the concave chest, the slim waist, the soft abdomen swelling obscenely beneath it.

Without taking his gaze off Hunter, the man addressed whispered words to someone out of sight. Hunter made out a muttered reply. The man nodded.

"My name is Alvarez," he said. "Do not be alarmed. You are in no danger. We are looking after you."

Oddly, far from reassuring him, the words put an end to the notion that he might still be dreaming, and convinced him of the reality of this situation.

He tried to speak but could not.

Alvarez was addressing his companion again, who had moved into Hunter's view: a fat man garbed in robes of gold and crimson.

Alvarez disappeared, returned seconds later with a rectangular, opaqued screen on castors. He positioned it before Hunter, so that it eclipsed his view of the sky. Hunter judged, from the position of the screen and his captors, that he was on the floor, Alvarez and the fat man standing on a platform above him.

He stared at the screen as Alvarez flicked a switch on its side.

A work of art? A macabre hologram that might have had some significance to the jaded citizens of The-World-

## HUNTING THE SLAUGHTER

of-a-  
Million-  
Wonders,  
who had seen  
*everything*  
before?

The 'gram showed the figure of a man, suspended – but the figure of a man such as Hunter had never before witnessed. It was as if the unfortunate subject of the artwork had been flayed alive, skinned to reveal purple and puce slabs of muscle shot through with lines of tendons, veins and arteries – like some medical student's computer graphic which built up, layer on layer, from skeleton to fully-fleshed human being.

At first, Hunter thought that the figure was a mere representation, a still hologram – then he saw a movement behind the figure, a bubble rising through the fluid in which it was suspended. And, then, he made out the slight ticking pulse at its throat.

He could not comprehend why they were showing him

this monster.

Alvarez leaned forward. "You have no reason to worry," he said. "You are progressing well, Mr Hunter, considering the condition you were in when you arrived."

Realization crashed through Hunter. He stared again at the reflection of himself, at the monstrosity he had become.

Alvarez opaqued the screen, wheeled it away. He returned and leaned forward. "We are delighted with your progress, Mr Hunter." He nodded to his fat companion. "Dr Fischer."

The doctor touched some control in his hand, and Hunter slipped into blessed oblivion.

When he came to his senses it took him some minutes before he realized that his circumstances were radically altered. The view through the dome was substantially the same – rainbows, towering trees – but shifted slightly, moved a few degrees to the right.

He watched a vast, majestic galleon edge slowly past the dome, its dozen angled, multi-coloured sails bellying in the breeze. He monitored its royal progress through the evening sky until it was lost to sight – and then he realized that he had, in order to track its passage, moved his head.

For the first time he became aware of his immediate surroundings.

He was in a small, comfortable room formed from a slice of the dome: two walls hung with tapestries, the third the outer wall of diamond facets.

With trepidation, he raised his head and peered down the length of his body. He was naked, but not as naked as he had been on the last occasion when he had seen himself. This time he was covered with skin – tanned, healthy-looking skin over well-developed muscles. He remembered the attack in the southern jungle of Tartarus, relived the terrible awareness of being riven limb from limb.

And now he was whole again.

He was in a rejuvenation pod, its canoe-shaped length supporting a web of finely-woven fibres which cradled him with the lightest of touches. It was as if he were floating on air. Leads and electrodes covered him, snaking over the side of the pod and disappearing into monitors underneath.

He tried to sit up, but it was all he could do to raise his arm. The slightest exertion filled him with exhaustion. But what did he expect, having newly risen from the dead?

He experienced then a strange ambivalence of emotion. Of course he was grateful to be alive – the fear of oblivion he had experienced upon first awakening was still fresh enough in his memory to fill him with an odd, retrospective dread, and a profound gratitude for his new lease of life. But something, some nagging insistence at the back of his mind, hectored him with the improbability of his being resurrected.

Very well – he was famous, was respected in his field, but even he had to admit that his death would have been no great loss to the galaxy at large. So why had

Alvarez, or the people for whom Alvarez worked, seen fit to outlay millions on bringing him back to life? For certain, Sam could not have raised the funds to finance the procedure, even if she had realized their joint assets. He was rich, but not *that* rich. Why, the very sailship journey from the rim world of Tartarus to the Core planet of Million would have bankrupted him.

He was alive, but *why* he was alive worried him.

He felt himself drifting as a sedative sluiced through his system.

Hunter opened his eyes.

He was in a room much larger than the first, a full quadrant of the dome this time. He was no longer attached to the rejuvenation pod, but lying in a bed. Apart from a slight ache in his chest, a tightness, he felt well. Tentatively, he sat up, swung his legs from the bed. He wore a short white gown, like a kimono. He examined his legs, his arms. They seemed to be as he remembered them, but curiously younger, without the marks of age, the discolorations and small scars he'd picked up during a life-time of tracking fauna through every imaginable landscape. He filled his chest with a deep breath, exhaled. He felt good.

He stood and crossed to the wall of the dome, climbed the three steps and paused on the raised gallery. A magnificent stellar galleon sailed by outside, so close that Hunter could make out figures on the deck, a curious assortment of humans and aliens. A few stopped work to look at him. One young girl even waved. Hunter raised his arm in salute and watched the ship sail away, conscious of the gesture, the blood pumping through his veins. In that instant, he was suddenly aware of the possibilities, of the wondrous gift of life granted him.

"Mr Hunter," the voice called from behind him. "I'm so pleased to see you up and about."

Alvarez stood on the threshold, smiling across the room at him. He seemed smaller than before, somehow reduced. Within the swaddles of his fine clothing – rich gold robes, frilled shirts – he was even more insect-like than Hunter recalled.

"I have so many questions I don't really know where to begin," Hunter said.

Alvarez waved, the cuff of his gown hanging a good half metre from his stick-like wrist. "All in good time, my dear Mr Hunter. Perhaps you would care for a drink?" He moved to a table beneath the curve of the dome, its surface marked with a press-select panel of beverages.

"A fruit juice."

"I'll join you," Alvarez said, and seconds later passed Hunter a tall glass of yellow liquid.

His thoughts returned to the jungle of Tartarus. "My wife...?" he began.

Alvarez was quick to reassure him. "Samantha is fit and well. No need to worry yourself on that score."

"I'd like to see her."

"That is being arranged. Within the next three or four days, you should be re-united."

Hunter nodded, reluctant to show Alvarez his relief or gratitude. His wife was well, he was blessed with a

new body, renewed life... so why did he experience a pang of apprehension like a shadow cast across his soul?

"Mr Hunter," Alvarez asked, "what are your last recollections before awakening here?"

Hunter looked from Alvarez to the tall trees receding into the distance. "Tartarus," he said. "The jungle."

"Can you recall the... the actual attack?"

Hunter nodded. "I remember, but vaguely. I can't recall what led up to it, just the attack itself. It's as if it happened years ago."

Alvarez was staring at him. "It did, Mr Hunter. Three years ago, to be precise."

Again, Hunter did not allow his reaction to show: shock, this time. Three years! But Sam had been carrying their child, his daughter. He had missed her birth, the first years of her life...

"You owe your survival to your wife," Alvarez continued. "She fired flares to frighten the beast that killed you, then gathered your remains." He made an expression of distaste. "There was not much left. Your head, torso... She stored them in the freeze-unit at your camp, then returned through the jungle to Apollinaire, and from there to the port at Baudelaire, where she arranged passage here, the only planet where your resurrection might be affected."

Hunter closed his eyes. He imagined Sam's terror, her despair, her frantic hope. It should have been enough to drive her mad.

Alvarez went on, "She applied for aid to a number of resurrection foundations. My company examined you. They reported your case to me. I decided to sanction your rebirth."

Hunter was shaking his head. "But how did Sam raise the fare to Million?" he asked. "And the cost of the resurrection itself? There's just no way..." What, he wondered, had she done to finance his recovery?

"She had to arrange a loan to get the both of you here. She arrived virtually penniless."

"Then how -?"

Alvarez raised a hand. There was something about the man that Hunter did not like: his swift, imperious gestures, his thin face which combined the aspects of asceticism and superiority. In an age when everyone enjoyed the means to ensure perfect health, Alvarez's affectation of ill health was macabre.

"Your situation interested me, Mr Hunter. I knew of you. I followed your work, admired your success. I cannot claim to be a naturalist in the same league as yourself, but I dabble..."

"I run many novel enterprises on Million," Alvarez went on. "My very favourite, indeed the most popular and lucrative, is my Xeno-biological Exhibit Centre, here in the capital. It attracts millions of visitors every year from all across the galaxy. Perhaps you have heard of it, Mr Hunter?"

Hunter shook his head, minimally. "I have no interest in, nor sympathy with, zoos, Mr Alvarez."

"Such an outdated, crude description, I do think. My Exhibit Centre is quite unlike the zoos of old. The centre furnishes species from around the galaxy with realistic simulacra of their native habitats, often extending

for kilometres. Where the species exhibited are endangered on their own worlds, we have instituted successful breeding programmes. In more than one instance I have saved species from certain extinction." He paused, staring at Hunter. "I have a large staff of experts in every field of xeno-biology," he went on, "though usually I hire operators from the planet in question to capture and transport the animals I require to update my exhibit. I would like you to -"

Hunter laid his drink aside, untouched. "I am a cameraman, Mr Alvarez. I hunt animals in order to film them. I have no expertise in capturing animals."

"What I need is someone skilled in the *tracking* of a certain animal. My team will perform the actual physical capture. On the planet in question, there are no resident experts, and as you are already *au fait* with the terrain..."

Hunter interrupted. "Where?" he asked.

"Where else?" Alvarez smiled. "Tartarus, of course."

It took some seconds for his words to sink in. Hunter stared across the room at the dandified zoo-keeper. "Tartarus?" He almost laughed. "Madness. Three years ago the scientists were forecasting the explosion of the supernova in two to three years at the latest."

Alvarez responded evenly. "The scientists have revised their estimates. They now think the planet is safe for another year."

Hunter sat down on the steps that curved around the room. He shook his head, looked up. "I'm sorry, Mr Alvarez. Tartarus holds too many bad memories for me. And anyway, it would be insane to go there with the supernova so imminent."

"I think you fail to understand the situation in which you find yourself, Mr Hunter. You and your wife are in debt to me to the tune of some five million credits. You are now, legally, in my employ -"

"I didn't ask to be resurrected. I signed nothing!"

Alvarez smiled. "Your wife signed all the relevant papers. She wanted you resurrected. She agreed to work for me."

Hunter experienced a strange plummeting sensation deep within him. He whispered, "Where is she?"

"Six months ago, when it was obvious that your resurrection would be successful, she left for Tartarus to do some field-work, investigations and preliminary tracking."

Hunter closed his eyes. Alvarez had him.

He thought of his child. Surely Sam would not take an infant to Tartarus. "Who's looking after our child while Sam is on Tartarus?" he asked.

Alvarez shook his head apologetically. "I never actually met your wife. Our negotiations were conducted via intermediaries. I know nothing of your wife's personal arrangements."

Hunter stood and contemplated the view, the tall trees marching into a slight mist, the canopy of rainbows and the sailships. It was against everything that Hunter believed in to hunt and trap an animal for captivity. How many lucrative commissions had he turned down in the past?

But there was one obvious difference in this case. If

the animal that Alvarez wanted capturing was not tracked and taken from Tartarus, then it faced annihilation come the supernova.

And there was the added incentive that soon he would be reunited with Sam.

"I seem to have little choice but to agree to your demands."

Alvarez smiled thinly. "Excellent. I knew you would see sense, eventually. We need a man of your calibre in order to track the creature I require as the prize of my collection."

"Which is?"

Alvarez paused for a second, as if for dramatic emphasis. "The Slarque," he said.

Hunter mouthed the word to himself in disbelief. Millennia ago, long before humankind colonized Tartarus, a sentient alien race known as the Slarque were pre-eminent on the planet. They built cities on every continent, sailed ships across the oceans, and reached a stage of civilization comparable to that of humanity in the 16th century. Then, over the period of a few hundred years, they became extinct – or so some theorists posited. Others, a crank minority, held that the Slarque still existed in some devolved form, sequestered in the mountainous jungle terrain of the southern continent. There had been reports of sightings, dubious "eye-witness" accounts of brief meetings with the fearsome, bipedal creatures, but no actual concrete evidence.

"Mr Hunter," Alvarez was saying, "do you have any idea what kind of creature was responsible for your death?"

Hunter gestured. "Of course not. It happened so fast. I didn't have a chance –" He stopped.

Alvarez crossed the room to a wall-screen. He inserted a small disc, adjusted dials. He turned to Hunter. "Your wife was filming at the time of your death. This is what she filmed."

The screen flared. Hunter took half a dozen paces forward, then stopped, as if transfixed by what he saw. The picture sent memories, emotions, flooding through his mind. He stared at the jungle scene, and he could almost smell the stringent, putrescent reek peculiar to Tartarus, the stench of vegetable matter rotting in the vastly increased heat of the southern climes. He heard the cries and screams of a myriad uncatalogued birds and beasts. He experienced again the mixture of anxiety and exhilaration of being in the unexplored jungle of a planet which at any moment might be ripped apart by its exploding sun.

"Watch closely, Mr Hunter," Alvarez warned.

He saw himself, a small figure in the background, centre-screen. This was an establishing shot, which Sam would edit into the documentary she always made about their field-trips.

It was over in five seconds.

One instant he was gesturing at the blood-red sky through a rent in the jungle canopy – and the next something emerged through the undergrowth behind him, leapt upon his back and began tearing him apart.

Hunter peered at the grainy film, trying to make out

his assailant. The attack was taking place in the undergrowth, largely obscured from the camera. All that could be seen was the rearing, curving tail of the animal – for all the world like that of a scorpion – flailing and thrashing and coming down again and again on the body of its victim...

The film finished there, as Sam fired flares to scare away the animal. The screen blanked.

"We have reason to believe," Alvarez said, "that this creature was the female of the last surviving pair of Slarque on Tartarus –"

"Ridiculous!" Hunter cried.

"They are devolved," Alvarez went on, "no longer intelligent, in fact little more than ravenous wild animals." He paused. "Do you see what an opportunity this is, Mr Hunter? If we can capture, and save from certain extinction, the very last pair of an alien race?"

Hunter gestured, aware that his hand was trembling. "This is hardly proof of its existence," he objected.

"The stinger corresponds with anatomical remains discovered which are known to be of the Slarque. Which other species on Tartarus has such a distinctive feature?" Alvarez paused. "Also, your wife has been working hard on Tartarus. She has come up with some very interesting information."

From a pocket in his robe, he pulled out what Hunter recognized as an ear-phone. "A couple of months ago she dispatched this report of her progress. I'll leave it with you." He placed it on the table-top beside the bed. "We embark for Tartarus in a little under three days, Mr Hunter. For now, farewell."

When Alvarez had left the room, Hunter quickly crossed to the bed and took up the 'phone. His hand trembled at the thought of listening to his wife's voice. He inserted the 'phone in his right ear, activated it.

Tears came to his eyes. Her words brought back a slew of poignant memories. He saw her before him, her calm oval face, dark hair drawn back, green eyes staring into space as she spoke into the recorder.

Hunter lay on the bed and closed his eyes.

*Apollinaire Town. Mary's day, 33rd St Jerome's month, 1720 – Tartarean calendar.*

By Galactic Standard it's... I don't know. I know I've been here for months, but it seems like years. Sometimes I find it hard to believe that anything exists beyond this damned planet. The sun dominates everything. During the day it fills the sky, bloated and festering. Even at night the sky is crimson with its light. It's strange to think that everything around me, the everyday reality of Tartarus I take for granted, will be incinerated in less than a year. This fact overwhelms life here, affecting everyone. There's a strange air of apathy and lassitude about the place, as people go about their business, marking time before the wholesale evacuation begins. The crime rate has increased; violence is commonplace. Bizarre cults have sprung up – and I mean even weirder than the official Church of the Ultimate Sacrifice.

Alvarez, I want you to pass this recording on to Hunter when he's fit and well. I know you want a progress report, and you'll get one. But I want to talk to

my husband, if you don't mind.

I'm staying at the Halbeck House hotel, Hunter – in the double room overlooking the canal. I'm dictating this on the balcony where we did the editing for the last film. I'm watching the sun set as I speak. It's unpleasantly hot, but at least there's a slight breeze starting up. In the trees beside the canal, a flock of nightgulls are gathering. You'll be able to hear their songs a little later, when night falls. A troupe of Lefevre's mandrills are watching me from the far balcony rail. I know you never liked the creatures, Hunter – but I find something inexplicably melancholy in their eyes. Do you think they know their time is almost up?

(Oh, by the way, the hotel still serves the most superb lemon beer in Apollinaire. Mmmm.)

Okay, Alvarez, I know – you want to hear how I'm progressing.

Three days ago I got back from a month-long trip into the interior. I'd been getting nowhere in either Apollinaire or Baudelaire. The leads I wanted to follow up all ran out – people were reluctant to talk, either because of superstition or because they thought I might ridicule them. A couple of people I wanted to interview – the freelance film-maker who recorded *something* ten years ago, and the uranium prospector who claimed he'd seen a Slarque... well, the film-maker left Tartarus a couple of years back, and the prospector is dead. I tried to make an appointment with the Director of the Natural History museum, but he was away and wasn't due back for a week. I left a message for him, then decided to take a trek into the interior.

Hunter, the ornithopter service no longer runs from Apollinaire. Gabriella's sold up and left the planet, and the new owner has re-sited the operation in Baudelaire. It's understandable, of course – these days there are few naturalists, geologists or prospectors interested in the southern interior. The only visitors to the area are the members of one of the crackpot cults I men-

tioned, the so-called *Slarqists*, who come here on their way to the alien temples down the coast. I don't know what they do there. There are rumours that they make sacrifices to the all-powerful God of the Slarque. Don't ask me what kind of sacrifices.

Anyway, with no ornithopters flying, I hired a tracked bison and two armed guards, and set off inland.

It took four days to reach the site of our first camp, Hunter – the rock pool beneath the waterfall, remember?

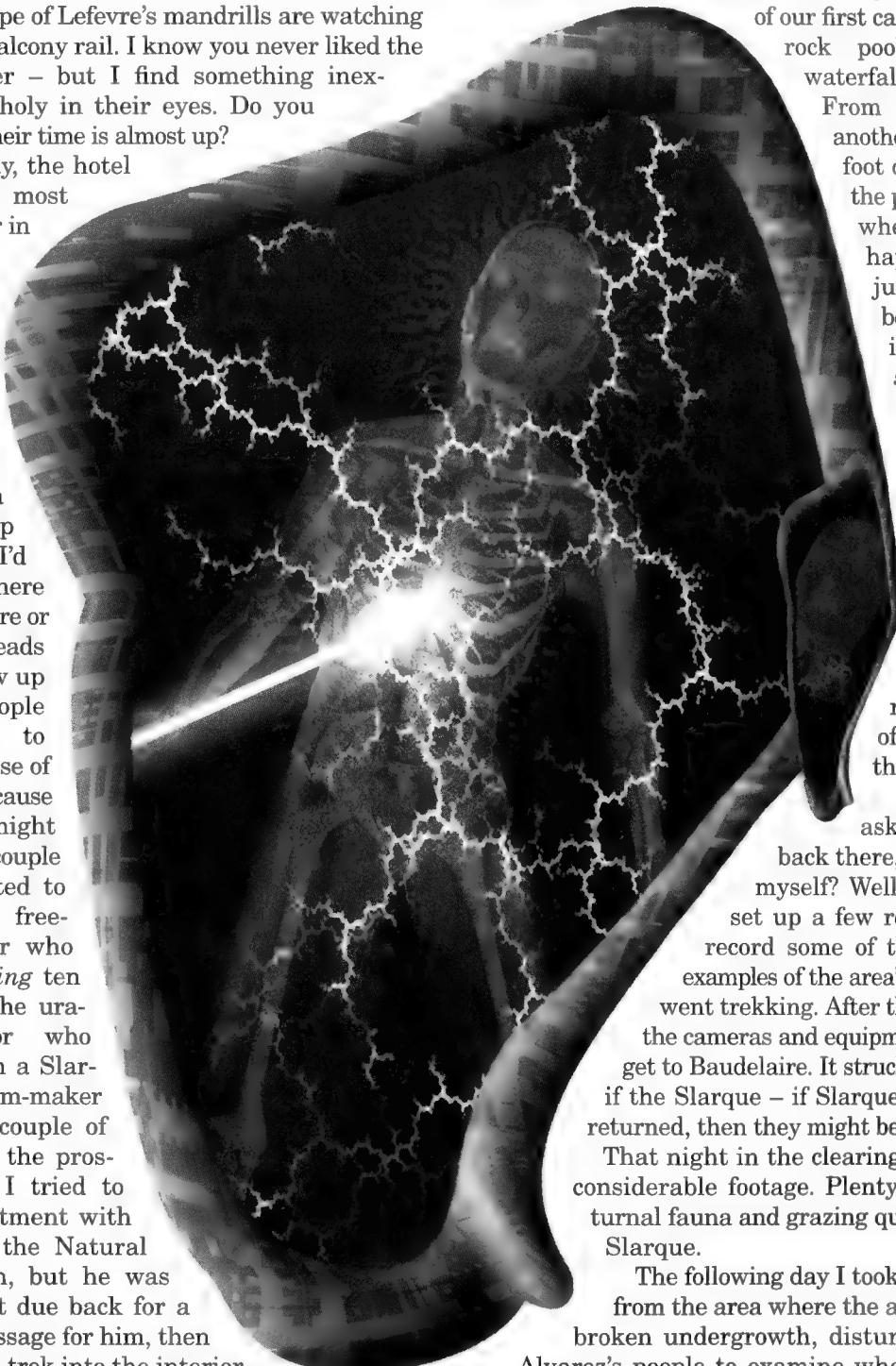
From there it was another two days to the foot of the plateau, to the place where you... where the attack happened. It was just how I remembered it – the opening in the smaller *salse* trees, the taller, surrounding trees providing a high-level canopy that blotted out the sun... I left the guards in the bison and just stood on the edge of the clearing and relived the horror of what happened three years ago.

I can hear you asking why I went back there, why did I torture myself? Well, if you recall, I'd set up a few remote cameras to record some of the more timorous examples of the area's wildlife while we went trekking. After the attack... I'd left the cameras and equipment in my haste to get to Baudelaire. It struck me that perhaps if the Slarque – if Slarque they were – had returned, then they might be captured on film.

That night in the clearing I viewed all the considerable footage. Plenty of shots of nocturnal fauna and grazing quadrupeds, but no Slarque.

The following day I took forensic samples from the area where the attack happened – broken undergrowth, disturbed soil, etc, for Alvarez's people to examine when they get here. Then I set up more cameras, this time fixed to relay images back to my base in Apollinaire.

I decided to make a few exploratory forays into the surrounding jungle. We had food and water for a couple of weeks, and as the guards were being paid by the hour they had no reason to complain. Every other day we made circular treks into the jungle, finishing back at the



camp-site in the evening. I reckon we covered a good 200 square kilometres like this. I filmed constantly, took dung samples, samples of hair and bone... Needless to say, I didn't come across the Slarque.

Just short of a month after leaving Apollinaire, we made the journey back. I felt depressed. I'd achieved nothing, not even laid the terror of that terrible day. It's strange, but I returned to Tartarus on this mission for Alvarez with extreme reluctance – if not for the fact that I was working for him to cover the cost of your treatment, I would have been happy to leave Tartarus well alone and let the Slarque fry when the sun blew. That was then. Now, and even after just a few days on the planet, I suddenly wanted to know what had killed you. I wanted it to have been the Slarque. I wanted to find out more about this strange race, which once had been sentient, had built grand cities across three continents, but now was devolved. I wanted to know *why* it had attacked you, if indeed there had been a reason other than base, animalistic imperatives.

I left the interior having found out nothing, and that hurt.

When I got back to Halbeck House, there was a message for me from the Director of the Natural History museum, Apollinaire. He'd seen and enjoyed a couple of our films and agreed to meet me.

Monsieur Dernier was in his early 80s, so learned and dignified I felt like a kid in his company. I told him about the attack, that I was eager to trace the animal responsible. It happened that he'd heard about the incident on the newscasts – he was happy to help me. Now that it came to it, I was reluctant to broach the subject of the Slarque, in case Dernier thought me a complete crank – one of the many crazy cultists abroad in Apollinaire. I edged around the issue for a time, mentioned at last that some people, on viewing the film, had commented on how the beast did bear a certain superficial resemblance to fossil remains of the Slarque. Of course, I hastened to add, I didn't believe this myself.

He gave me a strange look, told me that he himself subscribed to the belief, unpopular though it was, that devolved descendants of the Slarque still inhabited the interior of the southern continent.

He'd paused there, then asked me if I'd ever heard of Rogers and Codey? I admitted that I hadn't.

Dernier told me that they had been starship pilots back in the '80s. Their shuttle had suffered engine failure and come down in the central mountains, crash-landed in a remote snow-bound valley and never been discovered. They were given up for dead – until a year later when Rogers staggered into Apollinaire, half-delirious and severely frost-bitten. The only survivor of the crash, he'd crossed a high mountain pass and half the continent – it made big news even on Earth, 30 years ago. When he was sufficiently recovered to leave hospital, Rogers had sought out M. Dernier, a well-known advocate of the extant Slarque theory.

Lt Rogers claimed to have had contact with the Slarque in their interior mountain fastness.

Apparently, Rogers had repeated, over and over, that he had seen the Slarque, and that the meeting had been

terrible – and he would say no more. Rogers had needed to confess, Dernier felt, but, when he came to do so, the burden of his experience had been too harrowing to relive.

I asked Dernier if he believed Rogers' story.

He told me that he did. Rogers hadn't sought to publicize his claim, to gain from it. He had no reason to lie about meeting the creatures. Whatever had happened in the interior had clearly left the lieutenant in a weakened mental state.

I asked him if he knew what had become of Lt Rogers, whether he was still on Tartarus.

"Thirty years ago," Dernier said, "Lt Rogers converted, became a novice in the Church of the Ultimate Sacrifice. If he's survived this long in the bloody organization, then he'll still be on Tartarus. You might try the monastery at Barabas, along the coast."

So yesterday I took the barge on the inland waterway, then a pony and trap up to the clifftop Monastery of St Cyprian of Carthage.

I was met inside the ornate main gate by a blind monk. He listened to my explanations in silence. I said that I wished to talk a certain Anthony Rogers, formerly Lt Rogers of the Tartarean Space Fleet. The monk told me that Father Rogers would be pleased to see me. He was taking his last visitors this week. Three days ago he had undergone extensive penitent surgery, preparatory to total withdrawal.

The monk led me through ancient cloisters. I was more than a little apprehensive. I'd seen devotees of the Ultimate Sacrifice only at a distance before. You know how squeamish I am, Hunter.

The monk left me in a beautiful garden overlooking the ocean. I sat on a wooden bench and stared out across the waters. The sky was white hot, the sun huge above the horizon as it made its long fall towards evening.

The monk returned, pushing a... a *bundle* in a crude wooden wheelchair. Its occupant, without arms or legs, jogged from side to side as he was trundled down the incline, prevented from falling forwards by a leather strap buckled around his midriff.

The monk positioned the carriage before me and murmured that he'd leave us to talk.

I... even now I find it difficult to express what I thought, or rather *felt*, on meeting Father Rogers in the monastery garden. His physical degradation, the voluntary amputation of his limbs, gave him the unthreatening and pathetic appearance of a swaddled infant – so perhaps the reason I felt threatened was that I could not bring myself to intellectually understand the degree of his commitment in undergoing such mutilation.

Also what troubled me was that I could still see, in his crew-cut, his deep tan and keen blue eyes, the astronaut that he had once been.

We exchanged guarded pleasantries for a time, he suspicious of my motives, myself unsure as to how to begin to broach the subject of his purported meeting with the aliens.

I recorded our conversation. I've edited it into this report. I've cut the section where Fr Rogers rambled – he's in his 90s now and he seemed much of the time to

be elsewhere. From time to time he'd stop talking altogether, stare into the distance, as if reliving the ordeal he'd survived in the mountains. In the following account I've included a few of my own comments and explanations.

I began by telling him that, almost three years ago, I lost my husband in what I suspect was a Slarque attack.

*Fr Rogers:* Slarque? Did you say Slarque?

*Sam:* I wasn't one hundred percent sure. I might be mistaken. I've been trying to find someone with first-hand experience of...

*Fr Rogers:* The Slarque... Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on their wayward souls. It's such a long time ago, such a long time. I sometimes wonder... No, I know it happened. It can't have been a dream, a nightmare. It happened. It's the reason I'm here. If not for what happened out there in the mountains... I might never have seen the light.

*Sam:* What happened, Father?

*Fr Rogers:* Mmmm? What happened? What *happened*? You wouldn't believe me if I told you. You'd be like all the others, disbelievers all –

*Sam:* I have seen a Slarque, too.

*Fr Rogers:* So you say, so you say... I haven't told anyone for a long time. Became tired of being disbelieved, you see. They thought I'd gone mad... But I didn't tell anyone what really happened. It was too soon after the incident. I didn't want the authorities to go and find Codey, arrest him.

*Sam:* Codey, your co-pilot? But I thought he died in the crashlanding?

*Fr Rogers:* That's what I told everyone. Easier that way. He wanted people to think he hadn't survived, the sinner.

*Sam:* Father, can you tell me what happened?

*Fr Rogers:* It's... how long ago? Thirty years? More? There's little chance Codey will still be alive. Oh, he had supplies aplenty, but up here... up here he was sick and getting worse. He made me promise that I'd keep quiet about what he did – and until now I have. But what harm can it do now, with Codey surely long dead?

(He stopped here and stared off into the distance and the gothic monastery rearing against the twilight sky. Tears appeared in his eyes. I felt sorry for him. Part of me regretted what I was putting him through, but I was intrigued by the little he'd told me so far. I *had* to find out what he'd experienced, all those years ago.)

*Sam:* Father...?

*Fr Rogers:* Eh? Oh, the crashlanding. We came down too soon. Don't ask me why. I can't remember. Miracle we survived. We found ourselves in a high valley in the central mountains, shut in by snow-covered peaks all around. We were a small ship, a shuttle. The radio was wrecked and we had no other means of communication with the outside world. We didn't reckon the Fleet would waste much time trying to find us. We had supplies enough for years, and the part of the ship not completely stove in we used as living quarters. I made a few expeditions into the surrounding hills, trying to find a way out, a navigable pass that'd get us to the sea level jungle below the central range... But the going was just too

tough, the snow impassable.

It was on one of these abortive expeditions that I saw the first Slarque. I was coming back to the ship, wading through a waist-high snowdrift, frozen to the bone and sick with the thought that I'd never get away from this frozen hell.

The Slarque was on a spur of rock overlooking the valley. It was on all fours, though later I saw them standing upright. It was watching me. It was a long way off, and in silhouette, so I couldn't really make out much detail. I recognized the arched tail, though, whipping around above its back.

So when I returned to the ship I told Codey what I'd seen. He just stared at me for a long time – and I assumed he thought I'd gone mad – but then he began nodding, and he said, "I know. They've been communicating with me for the past three days." Then it was *my* turn to think *he'd* flipped.

(His gaze slipped out of focus again. He no longer saw the monastery. He was back in the mountain valley.)

*Fr Rogers:* Codey was strangely calm, like a man blessed with a vision. I asked him what he meant by "communicating." Looking straight through me, he just pointed to his head. "They put thoughts into here – not words, but thoughts: emotions, facts..."

I said, "Codey, you've finally gone, man. Don't give me any of that shit!" But Codey just went on staring through me like I wasn't there, and he began talking, telling me about the Slarque, and there was so much of it, so many details Codey just couldn't have known or made up, that by the end of it all I was scared, real scared, not wanting to believe a word of it, but at the same time finding myself half-believing...

Codey said that there were just two Slarque left. They were old, a couple of hundred years old. They had lived near the coast in their early years, but with the arrival of humans on the southern continent, and the melting of the ice as the sun warmed, they'd retreated further south, into the snowfields of the central mountains. Codey told me that the Slarque had dwindled because a certain species of animal, on which they were dependent, had become extinct long ago. Codey said that the female Slarque was bearing a litter of young, that she was due to birth soon... He told me many other things that night, as the snow fell and the wind howled outside – but either I've forgotten what else he said, or I never heard it at the time through fear... I went straight out into that gale and rigged up an electric fence around the ship, and I didn't stop work until I was sure it'd keep out the most fearsome predator.

The next day or two, I kept out of Codey's way, like he was contaminated... I ate in my own cabin, tried not to dwell on what he'd told me.

One night he came to my cabin, knocked on the door. He just stood there, staring at me. "They want one of us," he told me. As soon as he spoke, it was as if this was what I'd been fearing all along. I had no doubt who "they" were. I think I went berserk then. I attacked Codey, beat him back out of my cabin. I was frightened. Oh, Christ was I frightened.

In the morning he came to me again, strangely sub-

dued, remote. He said he wanted to show me something in the hold. I was wary, expecting a trick. I armed myself and followed him down the corridor of the broken-backed ship and into the hold. He crossed to a suspension unit, opened the lid and said, "Look."

So I looked. We were carrying a prisoner, a criminal suspended for the trip between Tartarus and Earth, where he was due to go on trial for the assassination of a Tartarean government official. I had not known what we were carrying – I hadn't bothered to check the manifest before take-off. But Codey had.

He said, "He'd only be executed on Earth."

"No," I said.

Codey stared at me. "It's either him or you, Rogers." He had his laser out and aimed at my head. I lifted my own pistol, saw that the charge was empty. Codey just smiled.

I said, "But... but when they've done with him – how long will he keep them satisfied? How long before they want one of us?"

Codey shook his head. "Not for a long while, believe me."

I ranted and raved at him, cried and swore, but the terrible inevitability of his logic wore me down – it was either the prisoner or me – and so at last I helped him drag the suspension unit from the ship, through the snow to the far end of the valley, where we left it with the lid open for the Slarque... I – I have never forgiven myself to this day. I wish now that I had had the strength to sacrifice myself.

(He broke down then, bowed his head and wept. I soothed him as best I could, murmured platitudes, my hand on the stump of his shoulder.)

*Fr Rogers:* That night I watched two shadowy ghosts appear at the end of the valley, haul the prisoner from the unit and drag him off through the snow. At first light next morning I kitted up, took my share of provisions and told Codey I was going to find a way out, that I'd rather die trying than remain here with him. I reckoned that with the Slarque busy with the prisoner, I had a slim chance of getting away from the valley. After that... who could tell?

Codey didn't say a word. He just stared at me. I tried to persuade him to come with me, but he kept shaking his head and saying that I didn't understand, that they needed him... So I left him and trekked north, fearful of the aliens, the snow, the cold. All I recall is getting clear of the valley and the Slarque, and the tremendous feeling of relief when I did. I don't remember much else. The terror of what I was leaving was worse than the thought of dying alone in the mountains. They tell me it's one and a half thousand kilometres from the central range to the coast. I don't know. I just walked and kept on walking.

(He was silent for a long, long time after that. At last he spoke, almost to himself.)

*Fr Rogers:* Poor Codey. Poor, poor Codey...

*Sam:* And... then you joined the Church?

*Fr Rogers:* Almost as soon as I got back. It seemed... the only thing to do. I had to make amends, to thank God for my survival and at the same time to make reparations for the fact that I did survive.

We sat for a time in silence, Father Rogers contemplating the past while I considered the future. I knew what I was going to do. I unfolded the map of the southern continent I had brought with me and spread it across the arms of the invalid carriage. I asked him where the shuttle had come down. He stared at the map for a long time, frowning, and finally quoted an approximate grid reference co-ordinate. I marked the valley with a cross.

I sat and talked with Father Rogers for a while, and then left him sitting in the garden overlooking the sea, and made my way back to Apollinaire.

That was yesterday. Today I've been preparing for the expedition. Unfortunately I've found no one willing to act as my bodyguard this time – because of the duration of the planned trip and the sun's lack of stability. I set off tomorrow in a tracked bison, with plenty of food, water and arms. I've calculated that it'll take me a couple of months to cover the one and a half thousand kays to the valley where the ship crash-landed. Fortunately, with the rise of the global temperature, the snow on the high ground of the central mountains has melted, so that leg of the journey should be relatively easy. With luck, the sun will hold steady for a while yet, though it does seem to be getting hotter every day. The latest forecast I've heard is that we're safe for another six to nine months...

I don't know what I'll find when I get to the valley. Certainly not Codey. As Father Rogers said, after 30 years he should be long dead. Maybe I'll hit lucky and find the Slarque? I'll leave transmitter beacons along my route, so you can follow me when you get here, whenever that might be.

Okay, Alvarez, that's about it. If you don't mind, I'd like the next bit to remain private, between Hunter and me, okay?

Hunter, the thought that sooner or later we'll be together again has kept me going. Don't worry about me, I have everything under control. Arabella is with me; I'm taking her into the interior tomorrow. And before you protest – don't! She's perfectly safe, as you'll find out in time. Hunter, I can't wait until we're reunited, until we can watch our daughter grow, share her discoveries... I love you, Hunter. Take care.

Hunter sat on the balcony of Halbeck House, where weeks before Sam had made the recording. He sipped an iced lemon beer and stared out across what had once been a pretty provincial town. Now the increased temperature of the past few months had taken its toll. The trees lining the canal were scorched and dying, and the water in the canal itself had evaporated, leaving a cracked bed of evil-smelling mud. Even the three-storey timber buildings of the town seemed weary, dried out and warped by the incessant heat. Although the sun had set one hour ago, pulling in its wake a gaudy, pyrotechnical display of flaring lights above the crowded rooftops, the twilight song of the nightgulls was not to be heard. Nor was there any sign of Lefervre's mandrills, usually to be seen swinging crazily through the wrought-iron

work of the balcony. An eerie silence hung in the air, a funereal calm presaging the planet's imminent demise.

Hunter, Alvarez and his entourage had arrived on Tartarus by the very last scheduled sailship; they would entrust their safe departure to one of the illegal pirate lines still ferrying adventurers, thrill-seekers, or just plain fools, to and from the planet. They had arrived in Apollinaire that morning, to find the town deserted, but for a handful of citizens determined to leave their flight to the very last weeks.

Three days ago, the sun had sent out a searing pulse of flame, a great flaring tongue, as if in derision of the citizens who remained. The people of Baudelaire and Apollinaire had panicked. There had been riots, much looting and burning – and another great exodus off-world. The regular shipping lines had been inundated by frantic souls desperate to flee – and the surplus had been taken by the opportunistic pirate ships that had just happened to be orbiting like flies around a corpse.

Technically, Halbeck House was no longer open for business, but its proprietor had greeted Hunter like a long-lost brother and insisted that he, Alvarez and the rest of the team make themselves at home: then he had taken the last boat to Baudelaire, leaving a supply of iced beer and a table set for the evening meal.

Hunter drank his beer and considered Father Rogers' story, which he had listened to again and again on the voyage to Tartarus. Although the old astronaut's words had about them a kind of insane veracity which suggested that he believed his own story, even if no one else did, it was stretching the limits of credulity to believe that not only did a last pair of Slarque still exist in the central mountains, but that they had been in mental contact with Codey. And the beast that had attacked and killed Hunter? Sam's footage of the incident was not conclusive proof that the Slarque existed, despite Alvarez's assumptions otherwise.

The more he thought about it, the more he came to the conclusion that the trip into the interior would prove fruitless. He looked forward to the time when he would be reunited with Sam, and meet his daughter Arabella for the very first time.

He had expected Sam to have left some message for him at the hotel – maybe even a pix of Arabella. But nothing had awaited him, and when he asked the proprietor about his daughter, the man had looked puzzled. "But your wife had no little girl with her, Monsieur Hunter."

Dinner that evening was taken on the patio beside the empty canal. The meal was a subdued affair, stifled by the oppressing humidity and the collective realization of the enormity of the mission they were embarking upon in the morning. Hunter ate sparingly and said little, speaking only to answer questions concerning the planet's natural history. The chest pains which had bothered him on Million had increased in severity over the past few days; that afternoon he had lain on his bed, racked with what he thought was a heart attack. Now he felt a familiar tightness in his chest. He was reassured that Dr Fischer was on hand.

The rest of their party, other than himself, Alvarez

and the Doctor, consisted of a team of four drivers-cum-guards, men from Million in the employ of the Alvarez Foundation. They tended to keep to themselves, indeed were congregated at the far end of the table now, leaving the others to talk together.

Alvarez was saying: "I made a trip out to the St Cyprian monastery this afternoon, to see if I could get anything more from Rogers."

Hunter looked up from his plate of cold meat and salad. "And?" He winced as a stabbing pain lanced through his lungs.

The entrepreneur was leaning back in his chair, turning a glass of wine in his fingers. He was dressed in a light-weight white suit of extravagantly flamboyant design. "I found Rogers, and a number of the other monks."

Dr Fischer asked, "Did you learn anything more?"

Alvarez shook his head. "A couple of the monks were dead. Rogers was still alive, but only just. They were strapped to great wooden stakes on the clifftop greensward, naked, reduced to torsos. Many had had their eyes and facial features removed. They were chanting. I must admit that in a perverse kind of way, there was something almost beautiful in the tableau."

"As an atheist," Hunter said, "I could not look upon such depredation with sufficient objectivity to appreciate any beauty. As far as I'm concerned, their cult is a sick tragedy."

"They could be helped," Dr Fischer said tentatively.

Hunter grunted a laugh. "I somehow doubt that your ministrations would meet with their approval."

The three men drank on in silence. At length, talk turned to the expedition.

Alvarez indicated the huge tracked bison he had transported from Million. The vehicle sat in the drive beside the hotel, loaded with provisions – food, water, weapons and, Hunter noticed, a collapsible cage lashed to the side.

"All is ready," Alvarez said. "We set off at dawn. Your wife's radio beacons are transmitting, and all we have to do is follow their course through the jungle. Our progress should be considerably quicker than hers. We'll be following the route she has carved through the jungle, and as we have four drivers working in shifts we'll be able to drive throughout the night. I estimate that, if all goes well, we should arrive at the valley of the crashlanding within two weeks. Then you take over, Mr Hunter, and with luck on our side we should bring about the salvation of the Slarque."

Hunter restrained himself from commenting. The pain in his chest was mounting. He told himself that he should not worry – Dr Fischer had brought him back to life once; he could no doubt do so again, should it be necessary – but something instinctive deep within him brought Hunter out in hot and cold sweats of fear.

Alvarez leaned forward. "Hunter? Are you –?"

Hunter clasped his chest. Pain filled his lungs, constricting his breathing. Dr Fischer, with surprising agility for a man his size, rounded the table and bent over Hunter. He slipped an injector from a wallet and sank it into Hunter's neck. The cool spread of the drug

down through his chest brought instant relief. He regained his breath little by little as the pain ebbed.

Dr Fischer said, "You've undergone a rapid resurrection programme, Mr Hunter. Some minor problems are to be expected. At the first sign of the slightest pain, please consult me." The Doctor exchanged a quick glance with Alvarez, who nodded.

Hunter excused himself and retired to his room.

He lay on his bed for a long time, unable to sleep. The night sky flared with bright pulses of orange and magenta light, sending shadows flagging across the walls of the room. He thought of Sam, and the daughter he had yet to meet, somewhere out there in the interior. He cursed the day he had first heard of Tartarus Major, regretted the three years it had robbed from his life. He slept fitfully that night, troubled by dreams in which Sam was running from the teeth and claws of the creature that had killed him.

He was woken in the morning at dawn, after what seemed like the briefest of sleeps, by the ugly klaxon of the tracked bison. The vehicle was equipped to sleep eight – in small compartments little wider than the individual bunks they contained. It was invitation enough for Hunter. He spent the first six hours of the journey catching up on the sleep he'd lost during the night. He was eventually awoken by the bucketing yaw of the bison as it made the transition from a relatively smooth surface to rough terrain.

Hunter washed the sweat from his face in the basin above his bunk, then staggered through the sliding door. A narrow corridor ran the length of the vehicle to the control cabin, where a driver wrestled with the wheel, accompanied by a navigator. A ladder led up to a hatch in the roof. He climbed into the fierce, actinic sunlight and a blow-torch breeze. Alvarez and Fischer were seated on a bench, swaying with the motion of the truck.

Hunter exchanged brief greetings and settled to quietly watching the passing landscape. They had moved from the cultivated littoral to an indeterminate area of characterless scrubland, and were fast approaching the jungle-covered foothills that folded away, ever hazier, to a point in the distance where the crags of the central mountains seemed to float on a sea of cloud.

They were following a route through the scrub which he and Sam had pioneered years ago in their own bison. The landmarks, such as they were – towering insects' nests, and stunted, sun-warped trees – brought back memories that should have cheered him but which served only to remind him of Sam's absence.

As the huge sun surged overhead and the heat became furnace-like, Alvarez and Dr Fischer erected a heat-reflective awning. The three men sat in silence and drank iced beers.

They left the scrubland behind and accelerated into the jungle, barreling down the narrow defile torn through the dense undergrowth by Sam's vehicle before them. It was minimally cooler in the shade of the jungle, out of the direct sunlight, but the absence of even a hot wind to stir the air served only to increase the humidity.

Around sunset they broke out the pre-packaged trays

of food and bulbs of wine, and ate to the serenade of calls and cries from the surrounding jungle. Hunter recognized many of them, matching physical descriptions to the dozens of songs that shrilled through the twilight. When he tired of this he said goodnight to Alvarez and the Doctor and turned in. He lay awake for a long time until exhaustion, and the motion of the truck, sent him to sleep.

This routine set the pattern for the rest of the journey. Hunter would wake late, join Alvarez and the Doctor for a few beers, eat as the sun set, then retire and lie with his chaotic thoughts and fears until sleep pounced, unannounced. His chest pains continued, but, as Dr Fischer ordered, he reported them early, received the quelling injection and suffered no more.

To counter boredom, he pointed out various examples of Tartarean wildlife to his fellow travellers, giving accounts of the habits and peculiarities of the unique birds and beasts. Even this pastime, though, reminded him of Sam's absence: she would have told him to stop being so damned sententious.

Seven days from Apollinaire, they came to the clearing where Hunter had lost his life. Alvarez called a halt for a couple of hours, as they'd made good time so far. The driver slewed the bison to a sudden stop. The comparative silence of the clearing, after the incessant noise of the engine, was like a balm.

Hunter jumped down and walked away from Alvarez and the others, wanting to be alone with his thoughts. The encampment had been as it was on the day of the attack; the dome-tent located centrally, the battery of cameras set up peripherally to record the teeming wildlife. His heart pounding, Hunter crossed to where he judged the attack had taken place. There was nothing to distinguish the area; the disturbed earth had scabbed over with moss and plants, and the broken undergrowth in the margin of the jungle had regrown. He looked down the length of his new body, for the first time apprehending the miracle of his renewed existence. Overcome by an awareness of the danger, he hurried back to the truck.

Sam had been this way – the tracks of her bison had patterned the clearing floor – but if she had left any recorded message there was no sign, only the ubiquitous radio transmitters which she had dropped at intervals of a hundred kilometres along her route.

They ate their evening meal in the clearing – a novelty after having to contend with the constant bucking motion of the truck at mealtimes so far. No sooner had the sun set, flooding the jungle with an eerie crimson night light, than they were aboard the bison again and surging through the jungle into territory new to Hunter.

Over the next six days, the tracked bison climbed through the increasingly dense jungle, traversing steep inclines that lesser vehicles would never have managed. They halted once more, two days short of their destination, at a natural pass in the mountainside which had been blocked, obviously since Sam's passage, by a small rock fall.

While Alvarez's men cleared the obstruction, Hunter walked back along the track and stared out over the continent they had crossed. They were at a high elevation

now, and the jungle falling away, the distant flat scrubland and cultivated seaboard margin, was set out below him like a planetary surveyor's scale model. Over the sea, the red giant sphere of the dying sun was like a baleful eye, watching him, daring their mission to succeed before the inevitable explosion.

Alvarez called to Hunter, and they boarded the truck on the last leg of the journey.

The night before they reached the valley where the starship had crash landed, Hunter dreamed of Sam. The nightmare was vague and surreal, lacking events and incidents but overburdened with mood. He experienced the weight of some inexpressible depression, saw again and again the distant image of Sam, calling for him.

He awoke suddenly, alerted by something. He lay on his back, blinking up at the ceiling. Then he realized what was wrong. The truck was no longer in motion; the engine was quiet. He splashed his face with cold water and pulled on his coverall. He left his cabin and climbed down into the fierce sunlight, his mood affected by some crossover depression from the nightmare. He joined the others, gathered around the nose of the bison, and stared without a word into the valley spread out below.

In Father Rogers' story the valley had been snow-filled, inhospitable, but over the intervening years the snow had melted, evaporated by the increased temperature, and plant life in abundance had returned to this high region. A carpet of grass covered the valley floor, dotted with a colourful display of wild flowers. Over the edges of the lower peaks which surrounded the valley, vines and creepers were encroaching like invaders over a battlement.

Hunter was suddenly aware of his heartbeat as he stared into the valley and made out the sleek, broken-backed shape of a starship, its nose buried in a semi-circular mound it had ploughed all those years ago, grassed over now like some ancient earthwork. Little of the original paintwork was observable through the cocoon of grass and creepers that had captured the ship since the thaw.

Then he made out, in the short meadow grass of the valley, the tracks of Sam's vehicle leading to the

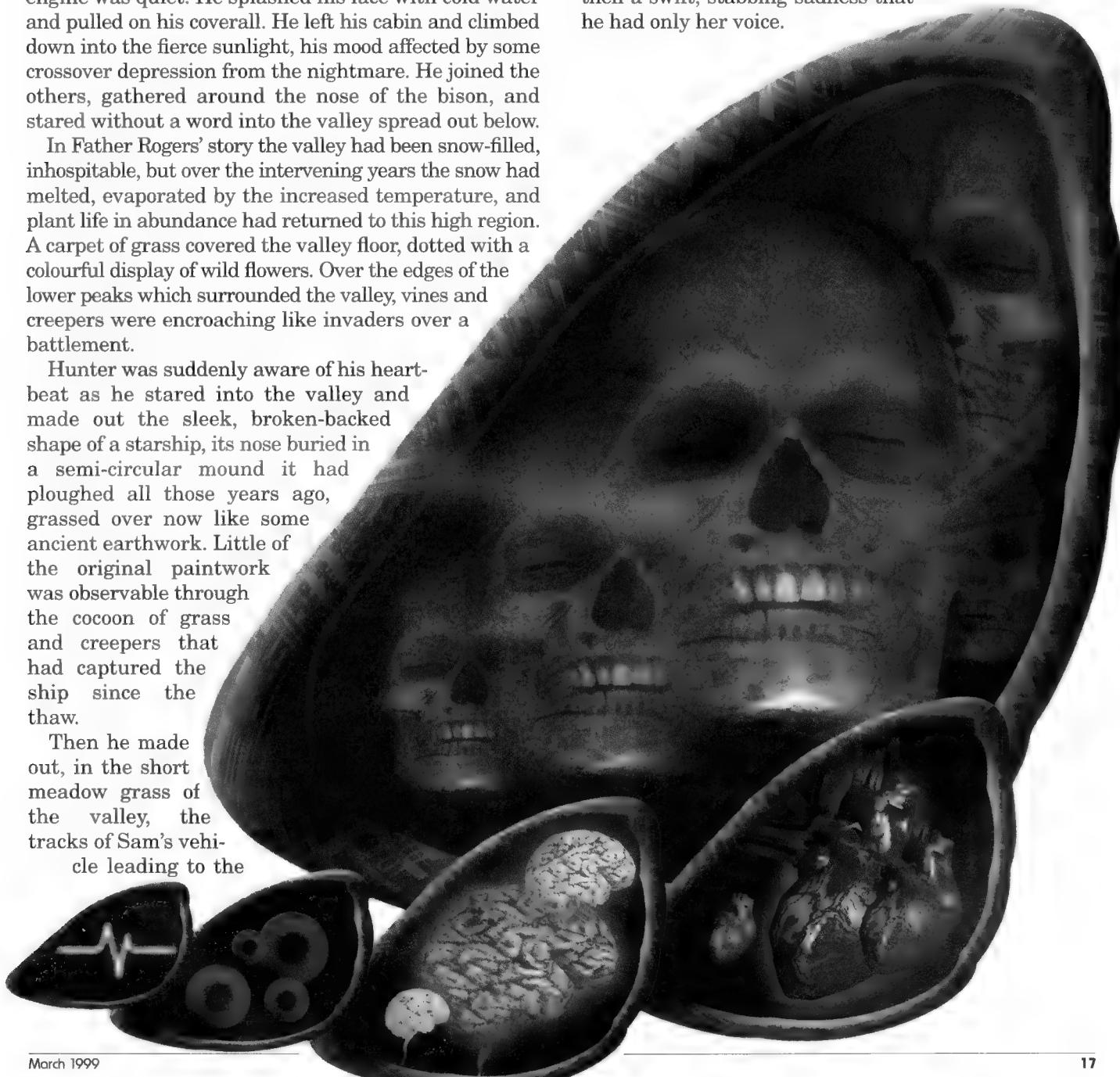
ship. He set off at a walk, then began running towards the stranded starship.

He paused before the ramp that led up to the entrance, then cautiously climbed inside. Creepers and moss had penetrated a good way into the main corridor. He called his wife's name, his voice echoing in the silence. The ship seemed deserted. He returned outside, into the dazzling sunlight, and made a complete circuit of the ship. There was no sign of Sam's truck – but he did see, leading away up the valley, to a distant, higher valley, the parallel imprint of vehicle tracks in the grass.

Beside the ramp was a radio beacon. Tied to the end of its aerial was Sam's red-and-white polka-dotted bandanna. Hunter untied it, discovered an ear-phone.

Up the valley, the others were straggling towards the ship in ones and twos. Before they reached him, Hunter sat on the ramp, activated the 'phone and held it to his ear.

The sound of Sam's voice filled him with joy at first, then a swift, stabbing sadness that he had only her voice.



*Somewhere in the interior... Luke's day, 26th, St Bede's month, 1720, Tartarean Calendar.*

I've decided to keep a regular record of my journey, more for something to do before I sleep each night than anything else.

I set off from Apollinaire three days ago and made good time, driving for ten, twelve hours a day. I preferred the days, even though the driving was difficult – the nights seemed to go on for ever. It didn't occur to me until I stopped on that first evening that I'd never camped alone in the interior before. It was a long time before I got to sleep – what with all the noises, the animal cries. The following nights were a bit better, as I got used to being alone. On the morning of the fourth day I was awoken by a great flare from the sun. I nearly panicked. I thought this was it, the supernova. Then I recalled all the other times it'd done that, when you were with me, Hunter. It wasn't the end, then – but perhaps it was some kind of warning. Nothing much else to report at the moment. Long, hot days. Difficult driving. I stopped yesterday at the clearing where... *it* happened. It brings back terrible memories, Hunter. I'm missing you. I can't wait till you're with me again. Arabella is well.

*The interior. Mary's day, 34th, St Bede's month.*

I've spent the last three days trying to find the best route through the damned foothills. The map's useless. I've tried three different routes and I've had to turn back three times, each times a dozen miles or more, wasting hours. Now I think I've found the best way through.

*The Central Mountains. Mathew's day, 6th, St Botolph's month.*

Well, I'm in the mountains now. The going is slow. What with a map that's no damned good at all, and the terrain clogged with new jungle since the thaw... I'm making precious little progress. Sometimes just ten kays a day. I haven't had a proper wash for ages, but I'm eating and sleeping well. I'm okay.

*Central Mountains. John's day, 13th, St Botolph's month.*  
Another frustrating week. I suppose it's a miracle that I've been able to get this far, but the bison's a remarkable vehicle. It just keeps on going. I reckon I'm three weeks from Codey's Valley, as I've started to think of it. At this rate you won't be far behind me. I've decided to leave the recording on one of the radio beacons somewhere, so you'll know in advance that I'm okay. So is Arabella.

*Central Mountains. Mark's day, 22nd, St Botolph's month.*  
I've been making good progress, putting in sometimes 14 hours at the wheel. I've had some good luck. Found navigable passes first time. I should make Codey's Valley in a week if all goes well. Oh, I've decided not to leave this recording on a beacon – it occurred to me that you might not stop, or that it might get swept away in a rock fall or whatever. So you'll have to listen to them all together when I'm with you, Hunter – listen to how hard I've worked.

*Central Mountains. Mary's day, 27th, St Botolph's month.*  
I'm just two or three days from Codey's Valley, and

whatever I'll find there. I must admit, I haven't really thought about what might be awaiting me – I've had too much to concentrate on just getting *here*, never mind worrying about the future. It'll probably just be a big anti-climax, whatever. I'll wait for you there, at the ship... I don't know why I'm talking to you like you'll be hearing this before I see you – but then again I do; it helps me think I'm talking to you, Hunter, person to person, rather than just keeping an impersonal diary, talking to myself... It's dark outside. I'm beneath a great overhanging shelf of rock that's blocking out the night sky's lights. I can't hear or see a single thing out there. I might be the only living soul for kilometres... I just want all this to be over. I want to get away from this damned planet. Promise me we'll go on a long, relaxing holiday when all this is over, Hunter, okay?

*Codey's Valley. I don't know what date, St Cyprian's month.*  
I... A lot has happened over the past couple of weeks. I hardly know where to begin. I've spent maybe ten, eleven days in a rejuvenation pod – but I'm not really sure how long. It seemed like ages. I'm okay, but still a bit woozy... I'm getting ahead of myself. I'll go back a bit – to the 28th, I think, when it happened.

I was a day away from the valley, according to the map. I was feeling elated that I was nearly there, but at the same time... I don't know, also apprehensive. I could think of nothing else but the Slarque, what they'd done to you. What they might do to me if they chose to... Anyway, perhaps I wasn't concentrating for thinking about this. I was driving up a ravine, crossing the steep slope. I'd had little trouble with the bison until then, so I think what happened was my fault. I lost control. You know how you feel in that terrible split second when you realize something life-threatening is about to happen, well... the truck rolled and I couldn't do a thing about it. I was knocked unconscious.

I don't know how long I was out, maybe a day or two. The pain brought me around a few times, then put me under again, it was that bad. I thought I'd cracked my skull, and there was something wrong with my pelvis. I couldn't move. The bison was on its side, with all the loose contents of the cab piled up around me. When I tried to raise myself – the pain! Then wonderful oblivion.

When I came to my senses, the truck was no longer on its side. It was upright again – and I wasn't where I'd been, in the cab. I was stretched out in the corridor, something soft cradling my head.

Then the truck started up and roared off up the side of the ravine, the motion wracking me with pain. I was delirious. I didn't know what the hell was happening. I cried out for the truck to stop, but I couldn't make myself heard over the noise of the engine.

When I regained consciousness again, night was falling. I'd been out for hours. The truck was moving, but along a flat surface that didn't cause me pain. I tried to look down the length of my body, into the cab, and as I did so the driver turned in his seat and peered down at me.

I knew it was Codey.

Spacers never loose that look. He was short and thick-set, crop-headed. I reckoned he was about 70 – Codey's

age – and while his body looked younger, that of someone half his age, his face was old and lined, as if he'd lived through a hundred years of hardship.

I passed out again. When I came to, I thought I'd dreamed of Codey – but the truck was stopped, its engine ticking in the silence. Then the side door opened and Codey, wearing old Fleet regulation silvers, climbed up and knelt beside me. He held an injector.

He told me not to worry, that he was going to take me to the ship, where he had a rejuvenation pod. He placed the cold nozzle to my bicep and plunged.

I felt nothing as he lifted me and carried me from the bison, across to the ship. He eased me down long corridors, into a chamber I recognized as an astrodome – the glass all covered and cloaked with creepers – and lay me in the rejuvenation pod. As I slipped into sleep, he stared down at me. He looked worried and unsure.

Yesterday, I awoke feeling... well, *rejuvenated*. Codey assisted me from the pod and led me to a small room containing a bunk, told me to make myself at home. The first thing I did was to hurry out to the truck and root around among its tumbled contents until I found the container, then carried it back to my new quarters. Codey watched me closely, asked me what it was. I didn't tell him.

I remembered what Fr Rogers had said about him, that he thought Codey had flipped. And that was *then*. For the past 30 years he'd lived up here *alone*. When I looked into his face I saw the consequence of that ordeal in his eyes.

*Codey's Valley. Mark's day, 16th, St Cyprian's month.* Early this morning I left my cabin, went out to the truck and armed myself. If the story Father Rogers had told me in the monastery garden was true, about Codey and the Slarque...

I remained outside the ship, trying to admire the beauty of the valley.

Later, Codey came out carrying a pre-heated tray of food. He offered it to me and said that he'd grown the vegetables in his own garden. I sat on the ramp and ate, Codey watching me. He seemed nervous, avoided eye contact. He'd not known human company in 30 years.

We'd hardly spoken until that point. Codey hadn't seemed curious about me or why I was here, and I hadn't worked out the best way to go about verifying Father Rogers' story.

I said that Rogers had told me about the crashlanding.

I recorded the following dialogue:

*Codey: Rogers? He survived? He made it to Apollinaire?*

*Sam: He made it. He's still there –*

*Codey: I didn't give him a chance of surviving... They monitored him as far as the next valley down, then lost him –*

*Sam: They?*

*Codey: The Slarque, who else? Didn't Rogers tell you they were in contact with me?*

*Sam: Yes – yes, he did. I didn't know whether to believe him. Are you... are you still in contact?*

*Codey: They're in contact with me... You don't believe me, girl?*

*Sam: I... I don't know –*

*Codey: How the hell you think I found you, ten klicks*

down the next valley? They read your presence.

*Sam: They can read my mind?*

*Codey: Well, let's just say that they're sympathetic to your thoughts, shall we?*

*Sam: Then they know why I'm here?*

*Codey: Of course.*

*Sam: So... If they're in contact with you, you'll know why I'm here...*

(Codey stood up suddenly and strode off, as if I'd angered him. He stood with his back to me, his head in his hands. I thought he was sobbing. When he turned around, he was grinning... insanely.)

*Codey: They told me. They told me why you're here!*

*Sam: ...They did?*

*Codey: They don't want your help! They don't want to be saved! They have no wish to leave Tartarus. They belong here. This is their home. They wish to die here, as they should, when the sun explodes.*

*Sam: But... but we can offer them a habitat identical to Tartarus – practically unbounded freedom –*

*Codey: They will die with their sun. It'd be an act of disgrace in the eyes of their forefathers if they fled the planet now.*

*Sam: And you?*

*Codey: I... I belong here. I couldn't live among humans again. I belong with the Slarque.*

*Sam: Why? Why do they tolerate you? One... one of them killed my husband –*

*Codey: I performed a service for them, 30 years ago, the first of two such. In return they keep me company... in my head... and sometimes bring me food.*

*Sam: Thirty years ago...? You gave them the prisoner?*

*Codey: They commanded me to do it! If I'd refused... Don't you see, they would have taken me or Rogers. I had no choice, don't you understand?*

*Sam: My God. Three years ago... my husband? Did you...?*

*Codey: I... please... I was monitoring your broadcasts, the footage you beamed to Apollinaire. You were out of range of the Slarque up here, and they were desperate. I had to do it, don't you see? If not... they would have taken me.*

*Sam: But why? Why? If they bring you food, then why –?*

Codey broke down then. He fled sobbing up the ramp and into the ship. I didn't know whether to shoot him in the back, or to go after him, comfort him, try to learn the truth. In the event I remained where I was, too emotionally drained to make a move.

It's evening now. I've locked myself in my cabin. I don't trust Codey – and I don't trust the Slarque. I'm armed and ready, but I don't know if I can keep awake all night.

Oh my God. Oh, Jesus. I don't believe it. I can't –

He must have over-ridden the locking system, got in during the night as I slept. But how did he know? The Slarque, of course. If they read my mind, knew my secret...

I didn't tell you, Hunter. I wanted it to be a surprise.

I wanted you to be there when Arabella was growing up. I wanted you to see her develop from birth, to share with you her infancy, her growth, to cherish her with you.

Two and a half years ago, Hunter, I gave birth to our

daughter. Immediately I had her suspended. For the past two years I've carried her everywhere I've been, in a suspension container. When we were reunited, we would cease the suspension, watch our daughter grow.

Last night, Codey stole Arabella. Took the suspension container. I'm so sorry, Hunter. I'm so...

I've got to think straight. He took his crawler and headed up the valley to the next one. I can see the tracks in the grass.

I'm going to follow him in my truck. I'm going to get our daughter back.

I'll leave this recording here, for when you come. Forgive me, Hunter... Please, forgive me.

He sat on the ramp of the starship with his head in his hands, the sound of his pulse surging in his ears as Alvarez passed Sam's recording to Dr Fischer. Hunter was aware of a mounting pain in his chest, as if in psychosomatic sympathy with what he'd just heard. He found himself on the verge of hysterical laughter at the irony of crossing the galaxy to meet his daughter, only to have her snatched from his grasp at the very last minute.

He looked up at Alvarez. "But why...? What can they want with her?"

Alvarez avoided his gaze. "I wish I knew –"

"We've got to go after them!"

Alvarez nodded, turned and addressed his men. Hunter watched, removed from the reality of the scene before him, as Alvarez's minions armed themselves with lasers and stun rifles and boarded the truck.

Hunter rode on the roof with Alvarez and Dr Fischer. As they raced up the incline of the valley, towards the v-shaped cutting perhaps a kilometre ahead, he scanned the rocky horizon for any sign of the vehicles belonging to Sam or Codey.

His wife's words rang in his ears, the consequences of what she'd told him filling him with dread. For whatever reasons, Codey had supplied the Slarque with humans on two other occasions. Obviously Sam had failed to see that she had been led into a trap, with Arabella as the bait.

They passed from the lower valley, accelerated into one almost identical, but smaller and enclosed by steep battlements of jagged rock.

There, located in the centre of the greensward, were Codey's crawler and Sam's truck.

They motored cautiously towards the immobile vehicles.

Twenty metres away, Hunter could wait no longer. He leapt from the truck and set off at a sprint, Alvarez calling after him to stop. The pain in his chest chose that second to bite, winding him.

Codey's crawler was empty; he could see that by looking through the clear side-screens. He ran from the crawler and hauled himself aboard Sam's truck. It, too, was empty.

Alvarez's men had caught up with him. One took his upper arm in a strong yet gentle grip, led him back to Alvarez who was standing on the greensward, peering up at the surrounding peaks.

Two of his men had erected the collapsible cage, then

joined the others at strategic positions around the valley. They knelt behind the cover of rocks, stun rifles ready.

An amplified voice rang through the air. "Hunter!" "Codey..." Alvarez said.

"Step forward, Hunter. Show yourself." The command echoed around the valley, but seemed to issue from high in the peaks straight ahead.

Hunter walked forward ten paces, paused and called through cupped hands, "What do you want, Codey? Where's Sam and my daughter?"

"The Slarque want you, Hunter," Codey's voice boomed. "They want what is theirs."

Hunter turned to Alvarez, as if for explanation.

"Believe me," Alvarez said, "It was the only foolproof way we had of luring the Slarque –"

Hunter was aware of the heat of the sun, ringing blows down on his head. "I don't understand," he said. "Why me? What do they want?"

Alvarez stared at Hunter. "Three years ago," he said, "when the Slarque attacked and killed you, it laid the embryos of its young within your remains, as has been their way since time immemorial. The animals they used in times past began to die out millennia ago; hence the fall of the Slarque. It so happened that humans are also a suitable repository... Of course, when Sam rescued your remains and had them suspended, the embryos too were frozen. We discovered them when we examined your remains on Million."

Hunter was shaking his head. "You used me..."

"It was part of the deal, Hunter. For your resurrection, you would lead us to the Slarque."

"But if you wanted the Slarque, you had them! Why didn't you raise the embryos for your exhibition?"

"The young would not survive more than a few months. We examined the embryos and found that they'd been weakened by inbreeding, by cumulative genetic defects. I suspect that the brood incubated in the body of the prisoner 30 years ago did not survive. We need the only existing pair of adult Slarque for the exhibition."

Something moved within Hunter's chest. He winced.

Dr Fischer approached. "A pain-killer."

Hunter was unable to move, horrified at what Alvarez had told him and at the same time in need of the analgesic to quell the slicing pain in his chest. He just stood as Fischer plunged the injector into his neck.

Codey's voice rang out again. "Step forward, Hunter! Approach the south end of the valley. A simple trade: for the Slarque young, your wife and daughter."

Hunter stepped forward, began walking.

Behind him, Alvarez said, "Stop right there, Hunter. Let the Slarque come to you... Remember our deal?"

Hunter hesitated, caught between obeying the one man capable of granting him life, and the demands of the Slarque who held his wife and daughter.

The pain in his chest was almost unbearable, as if his innards were being lacerated by swift slashes of a razor blade. My God, if this was the pain with the sedative...

He cried out, staggered forward.

"Hunter!" Alvarez cried.

He turned. He saw Alvarez raise the laser to his shoulder, take aim. He dived as Alvarez fired, the cobalt

bolt lancing past him with a scream of ionized air.

From the overhanging rocks at the head of the valley, Hunter saw a quick succession of laser fire issue from a single point. He turned his head in time to see the first vector hit Alvarez, reducing him to a charred corpse. The succeeding blasts accounted for the others, picking them off one by one.

Only Dr Fischer remained, hands in the air, terrified.

Hunter hauled himself to his feet and ran, trying to ignore the pain in his chest. He came to the head of the valley and struggled up the incline towards the gap in the rocks, calling Sam's name.

He stopped when he reached the crest of the rise and fell to his knees. In a clearing between the rocks he made out movement. The pain tore at his torso, dimming his vision, forcing a cry from his lips.

He watched two nightmare figures emerge from the rocks and approach him. They stood taller than a man, thin silver-grey forms, hunched over and predatory. As they advanced upon him, Hunter tried to tell himself that he should not feel fear: their interest in him was entirely understandable.

"Sam!" he cried.

In his last few seconds of consciousness, Hunter saw his wife run from the cover of the rocks and dash past the Slarque. He was suddenly struck by the improbable juxtaposition of ugliness and extreme beauty. Behind her, he saw a thin, bedraggled human figure – the madman Codey. In that second he remembered the death of Alvarez, and wondered if Codey's action in killing the others meant that he, Hunter, would die without hope of resurrection on this infernal planet.

He keeled over before Sam reached him, and then she was cradling him, repeating his name. Hunter lay in her arms, stared up at her face eclipsing the swollen sun.

He felt the lifeforms within him begin to struggle, a sharp, painful tugging as they writhed from his chest and through his entrails, the tissue of his stomach an easier exit point than his ribcage.

"Sam?" he said weakly. "Arabella...?"

Sam smiled reassurance through her tears. Behind her, Hunter saw the monstrous heads of the Slarque as they waited. He tried to raise his face to Sam's, but he was losing consciousness, fading fast. He was aware of

a sudden loosening of his stomach muscles as the alien litter fought to be free.

The he cried out, and died for the second time.

*Aboard the Angel of Mercy, orbiting Tartarus Major, 1st, May, 23, 210 – Galactic Reckoning.*

I need to make this last entry, to round things off, to talk.

With Dr Fischer I collected the remains – the bodies of Alvarez and his men – and your body, Hunter. Fischer claims he'll be able to resurrect Alvarez and the other men lasered by Codey, but he didn't sound so sure. Personally, I hope he fails with Alvarez, after what he put you through. The man doesn't deserve to live.

I've negotiated a price for our story with NewsCorp – they've promised enough to pay for your resurrection. It'll be another three years before you're alive again. It's a long time to wait, and I'll miss you, but I guess I shouldn't complain. Of course, I'll keep Arabella suspended. I look forward to the day when together we can watch her grow.

The final exodus has begun. I can look through the viewscreen of my cabin and see Tartarus and the giant sphere of the sun, looming over it. Against the sun, a hundred dark specks rise like ashes – the ships that carry the citizens to safety. There's something sad and ugly about the scene, but at the same time there's something achingly beautiful about it, too.

By the time we're together again, Hunter, Tartarus will be no more. But the exploding star will be in the heavens still, marking the place in space where the Slarque and poor Codey, and the other lost souls who wished for whatever reasons to stay on Tartarus, perished in the apocalypse.

I can't erase from my mind the thought of the Slarque, those sad, devolved, wild animals – who wanted only to live in freedom and raise their young, and who thanks to Codey and you were able to do so.

**Eric Brown** last appeared here with "Onward Station" (issue 135). He has two new books due out in 1999: an adult sf novel, *Penumbra* (Orion); and a children's sf novel in the shared-world "Web" series, *Walkabout* (also Orion). A previously-announced small-press collection of short stories co-written with Keith Brooke, *Parallax View* (Tanjen), has been postponed due to the publisher's unfortunate problems.

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## ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

## THE YEAR OF THE JACKPOT

**Bob Kane** (1916-1998), comics artist and co-creator in 1939 of Batman, died suddenly at his home on Los Angeles in early November. He was 82.

**John Barnes** cleared up a small mystery that puzzled British sf readers: the blurb of his *Earth Made of Glass* (Orion UK), goes on about places and names – like Chaka Zulu – that appear nowhere in the book. “Here’s what happened: while A Certain Publisher was going through administrative chaos, with some resignations and places not filled, time came up for *EMOG* to come out, and there was no flap copy. They were just buying the printed pages from Tor/St Martin’s, so they weren’t fretting about the inside of the book, but a jacket must have copy... so they went digging through the files to see what they could find, and what they found was a five-year-old proposal for a different, now never-to-be-written, book, called *Junction of Fear*... which they and the American publishers had very wisely rejected. Parts of *Junction of Fear*, the better parts I hope, were cannibalized into *Earth Made of Glass*, so it’s not wholly inaccurate... just thoroughly bewildering to the poor reader.” Who was it who defined “publisher” as “a person with no time to read books”?

**Pat Cadigan** instructed all right-thinking sf people (“Especially YOU, Langford. You Dog”) to buy the 30 December *Guardian* with her cutting-edge interview on the “Parents” page. Here, in mordant, no-holds-barred phrases, the Queen of Cyberparenting laid bare her controversial fondness for Lego, pizza and TV wrestling. One revelation was regarded as too hot for *Grauniad* readers: “I would

also like to take the opportunity to deny, categorically, that *Xena: Warrior Princess* is not based on me. No, it isn’t. Absolutely not.”

**Jean-Claude Forest** (1930-1998), the French artist who created the original *Barbarella* comic strip, died at the end of December.

**Tom Holt** passed on horrific movie news from Canada, where there are plans for “a super realistic animated feature film: *Princess Diana Saves The World*.” The high concept is that Di returns to Earth as “The world’s most loved adorable angel.” Literally: advance publicity features an “original oil masterpiece” showing her with wings and a halo, while the Union Jack subtly turns into a cross above her head. In editorial circles, the words “Bags I write this movie entry for the second edition of the *Fantasy Encyclopedia*!” were conspicuously not heard.

**Joe Orlando** (1927-1998), long-time comics artist and editor, died just before Christmas, aged 71. Titles he was involved with include EC’s *Tales from the Crypt*, *Little Orphan Annie*, *House of Mystery*, *Swamp Thing* and – right up to his death – *Mad* magazine.

**Robert J. Sawyer** abruptly ceased to be SFWA President late in December: “Enough. I resign. Effective immediately, Dr Paul Levinson is the new President of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, Inc.” Although SFWA is tight-lipped about internal frictions, rumblings of mutiny were apparently heard following RS’s revival of the unpopular membership requalification issue, use of rarely invoked presidential powers to “fire” several long-serving SFWA volunteers (SFWA’s lawyer and *Forum* editor were also allegedly under threat), and controversial plans to tinker with the Grandmaster Nebula Award rules. During the SFWA meeting at the 1998 Worldcon, certain authors had called for a vote of censure against RS. All great fun for spectators...

**Don Taylor** (1920-1998), who directed *Escape from the Planet of the Apes*, *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1977) and *Damien: Omen 2*, died in late December aged 78.

## INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

**The Sources of the Nile.** At last our true origins are revealed by a US newspaper, *The Atlanta Constitution*: “J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1963) was the creator of the imaginary *Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*, which spawned the entire genre of fantasy science fiction.”

**Motes and Beams.** SF-lovers’ hearts, and bowels, will be stirred by this new breed of press release: “Beaming

*Down. Stardate: 11-20 March 1999.* Lincolnshire County Council is offering science buffs a close encounter with many of the country’s biggest names in science fact and fiction when they beam down in Lincolnshire next March for Elements, a new breed of literary festival. To go on the mailing list, write to Maria Lyon, Elements Festival Co-ordinator, c/o Cultural Services, Lincs County Council, County Offices, Newland, Lincoln, LN1 1YL. Make a date... and you too can go where no festival has gone before!” *Press Officer:* “But we failed to achieve a 100% score, Captain... we didn’t mention sci-fi or anoraks.” *Festival Co-ordinator:* “Make it so!”

**Thog’s Language Lessons.** Years ago Kingsley Amis trounced the translation of Harry Martinson’s sf poem *Aniara*, for its “silly made-up terms [...], a habit now practised in only the very worst magazine stories.” One of his execrated examples: *loxodrome*. Oops.

**Conventions.** No room here to list sf conventions, but for readers with web access Chris O’Shea maintains a useful convention calendar at [www.smof.com](http://www.smof.com).

**Thog’s Masterclass.** *Dept of Seriously Hard SF:* “It was calibrated so that a level of zero equaled the mean solar gamma flux with a quiet sun. The current level – sixty-three – only meant something if you knew that the readout scale was the base-e log of the gamma intensity. That was easy to deal with if you knew, as Celine did, that  $e^3$  is about equal to twenty. So an increase in three in readout value was equivalent to a factor of twenty multiplier in actual gamma-ray level. Readout level sixty-three then meant that the current gamma flux was  $20^{63/3}$  of the usual value.  $20^{21}$  was rather more than  $10^{27}$ . Space outside the shielded compartment of the *Schiaparelli* was hot, hell-hot, with the gamma-ray burst from Supernova Alpha.” (Charles Sheffield, *Aftermath*, 1998)... “David saw him nod imperceptibly.” (Tom Deitz, *Windmaster’s Bane*, 1986)... “Yrch! said Legolas, falling into his own tongue.” (J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 1954-5)... “Adrenaline pounds at her heart with rubber mallets.” (Walter Jon Williams, *Metropolitan*, 1995)... “Dr Vlad sat back with his large ears poised like sinister microphones of flesh.” (John E. Muller, *Return of Zeus*, 1962)... “He was hauled into the air like a sack of miscellaneous helplessness.” (Stephen Donaldson, *Lord Foul’s Bane*, 1977)... *Dept of Hazards of Picking One’s Nose:* “...his large nostrils flared with rage, big as cannon muzzles.” (Harry Harrison, *Stars and Stripes Forever*, 1998)

# SERENDIPITY & SERIAL KILLERS

Most interviews with Chaz Brenchley take place in a pub, and mine was no exception. Halfway through my meeting with him (by which time a good rapport had been established: we were on our third beer and he was sipping lightly on his sixth cigar), I posed the question that I'd been nervous to pose until that point. I'd been scared to hear the answer. And more importantly, I'd been scared (I realize with hindsight) that Brenchley would be offended by my presumption. (No interviewee has walked out on me yet, but there's a first time for everything.) So rather lamely I added afterwards: "...if you don't mind discussing it." But Brenchley didn't mind at all – or seem to mind. The question was as follows:

Why are you so preoccupied with serial killers – especially those who use a knife?

You see, the answer could only be one of two things, or so I'd imagined. For we are not talking about fiction in which a serial killer shows up from time to time (we could pass off such a fascination to the whims of crowd-pleasing entertainment). In Brenchley's work there is often a need to include a serial killer that is every bit as pathological as the killer's aims themselves.

Chaz Brenchley was either going to say:

"Well, I've always loved going out at night with a knife and seeing how the evening turned out."

Or some such nonsense. Or:

"I lost someone dear to me to a knife-wielding maniac."

Which of course was the answer he gave.

"There's a personal connection there," he explained. "I hadn't really realized I was still working this out until a couple of years ago, when somebody said, 'Chaz, you're still writing about Andy, aren't you?' Things fell into place. I thought, 'Fuck. I am...' Seventeen years ago I had a boyfriend for six months and he



***Chaz Brenchley***  
*interviewed by David Mathew*

was murdered in a car park. It's one of those monstrous guilt things you never get rid of. He worked in a nightclub, and I said I'd go down and meet him after work. I didn't because I was visiting somebody else. And he died. If I'd been there he probably wouldn't have. They never caught the killer. At that time it was a freak thing; a few years after that Newcastle, for one or two years, was the most

violent place to live on mainland Britain. But at the time... like I say, a freak thing. And yes, knives I still do write about."

He has been writing violent novels and stories since he published *The Samaritan* in 1988; but this fact only gives part of the picture. It fails to mention the fantasy tales he has written for children: *The Thunder Sings*, *The Fishing Stone* and *The Dragon in*

the Ice, all 1988 as well. ("The books I did for children are more traditional fantasies – almost fairy tales. I'm really fond of them. I mean to go back to them at some point.") What should also be noted is that Brenchley spent a decade writing teen romances after abandoning university after two terms. From teen romances to serial killers might seem an odd way in, but it's worked for Chaz.

He was born in Oxford in 1959, and his older sister taught him to read when he was three. "I don't honestly remember when I started writing," he told me. "But one thing I remember is that I was constantly writing, and getting into trouble for it." During his teenage years his life was difficult: he found his education unpleasant, and his parents had divorced; he lost what religious feelings he had entertained in the first place. It might be said, therefore, that in agreement with many writers, Brenchley used writing as an emotional crutch. "All I know for sure is that through my teenage, I was going to be a science-fiction or fantasy writer. That was all there was to it. I spent years starting bad fantasy novels and never finishing them – total Tolkien rip-offs. I decided not to write any more fantasy until I could think of something original. But ever since I discovered that books were written by people – that it could be a job – that's what I wanted to do."

His introduction to teenage romantic fiction came via his younger sister, who was 15 at the time. Brenchley read some of her magazines and decided that if people would pay for such work, then he would write it. For his first try he "was paid £36! In a way, I still can't believe it. That's almost the defining moment of my career." After five years of writing for teenagers, for children's comics, "for war comics and puzzle magazines" he wrote a romantic novel (as "Carol Trent") in 1983. His agent asked him to write a "proper novel" under his own name. At the time, as now, he was living in Newcastle. "I'd always had a romantic notion of wanting to be Scottish. I spent a few weeks trying to find somewhere to live in Edinburgh. Failed. And decided to move back to Oxford. On my way down I stayed in Newcastle for a weekend. That was 17 years ago, and I'm still there. It grabbed me. It inspires me." He needed the city to coax out of him this "proper novel."

"I like to go out walking, and knowing I was required to think something up sometime soon I went for a walk and saw a poster advertising the Samaritans. I talked the idea over and was told to get on and do it." *The Samaritan* was the result: a tale of a

*It occurred to me  
that there was a book  
to be written about  
a gangster family  
that ran a town  
with magic  
rather than muscle.*

man who counsels and then kills lonely people. He found out that it had been accepted on returning home from the dentist, with a numb jaw. Instead of the recommended hot tea he spent the following days drinking nothing but champagne. "I didn't have to buy a single bottle..." he said to me.

Then a crisis hit home. "My agent asked me to come down and meet the publishers, asking me to bring with me an idea for my second novel. I had just spent three-and-a-half years writing this one. I panicked. Didn't know what the hell I was to do. Then... things happen by serendipity to me. At the time I didn't have a television so I used to listen to Radio Four a lot. There was a five-minute bit I heard about a refuge for runaway teenagers. Not even the police knew where it was. It was a chance to write seriously about teenagers, because I'd spent ten years writing crap for them. It was wonderful. A lot of people have mentioned that I write about teenagers very well; the presumption, I suppose, is that I never grew up. But the thing about adolescence is, it's the most potent time of change; and all fiction is about change. It's very focused in teenagers; as you get older you change less. Over lunch I sold my publishers the idea (for *The Refuge*, 1989)... and suddenly I was a real writer."

By the time he was writing his third book, *The Garden* (1990), he was using his working time differently. "The first three books, I wrote careful synopses and stuck to them. My publishers had told me that most people

sold a book by writing a synopsis and getting a commission – then throw the synopsis away and write the book. With me, the synopsis felt so concrete that it had to go in the book. *The Garden*, my favourite of the first four, broke that for me, because the thing about writing a synopsis is... it takes two weeks. What you've got then is a year to write the book – based on two weeks of ideas. For the book after that (*Mall Time*, 1991) I actually couldn't write a synopsis for it. It wouldn't have helped the plot. It was my attempt to write a book that Hollywood might have made a movie out of. It's not really a novel at all; it's a disaster movie. It's basically *Die Hard 4: The Shopping Mall*. Except there's no Bruce Willis character; no hero. There are various characters who try to do heroic things and fail. All I knew about it before I started was that it was set in the Metro Centre. 'Gunman goes mad in Metro Centre.' I spent the first third of it creating characters who were likely to be in the right place at the right time. Then I let the gunman loose, and spent the rest of the book trying to work out what happened. Who would live, who would die. It makes better books because you get a year's worth of ideas in, rather than two weeks' worth. But I also found it deeply scary; I thought, all these threads are never going to come together. But they did... When I came to write *Paradise* (1994), I did the same again; but because it was a much bigger book – with two dozen major characters and half a dozen plot threads – when I was halfway through it, I panicked and couldn't work on it for a few months. After three months of drinking and playing a lot of snooker, and being totally depressed, it was time to pull myself together and do it. It worked incredibly well."

Indeed, *Paradise* remains one of Brenchley's favourite novels. "The books up to and including *Paradise* are very different. The thing about *Paradise* is, it's a huge book; it's about Newcastle, but it's also about religion – about faith and power and what happens when they coalesce, when they collide. It's a massive book. It went through three editors because of change-arounds at the publishers, and therefore it went through three changes of direction, in terms of the way it was going to be promoted. Originally, it was going to be a crime novel, then it was going to be mainstream, and eventually it came out as horror. Which it isn't. I mean, I'm not exactly sure what it is, but it ain't horror. Anyway. Because they published it as horror, when it came time to talk about what I was going to do next, what I wanted to do was a companion book to *Paradise* – something equally big. But where *Paradise* was

urban, I wanted the new one to be rural. Well, it had taken me two years to write *Paradise* and I was deeply in debt, and the money that was being offered wouldn't have covered my debt, let alone the presumed two years that it would take me to write a new book. So I was holding out – oddly, for me. Eventually they said, we'll stick an extra book on to the contract, we'll give you an extra five grand, just knock us out a straight horror novel and we'll put it out straight to paperback and no one will worry about it...

"I said, 'Fine.' Then I sat down to think about this. I live in the rough end of town, and there are a couple of big gangster families, who effectively run all the organized crime in the area. In one of the local pubs a shot had rung out, and people had gone diving into the back room; and one of the sons of one of the families was dead. The big buzz around town for the next few days was the son and his friend had been playing Russian Roulette. So I was thinking about families running towns, and it occurred to me that there was a book to be written about a gangster family that ran a town with magic rather than muscle. That's all I need to start a book. It turned out to be the story of a younger member of the family, who didn't have the magic and was trying not to live the way his family lived. (*Dead of Light*, 1995.) I didn't knock the book off in a year, mainly because I was doing a writer's residency..."

Brenchley has described this residency as "the world's oddest job." The book that came out of it (*Blood Waters*, 1996; a short-story collection, and highly recommended for anyone who has not read any of Brenchley's work) elaborates further: "At the time, it seemed as though it had to be one of the strangest jobs in the country; retrospect assures me that I was too cautious in my judgement, and it was in fact the strangest job in the known universe.

"One day my phone was hot with people phoning up and saying, 'Chaz, Chaz, have you seen *The Guardian*?' I don't read papers. There was a job in it, virtually 'Chaz Brenchley Wanted.' I dived down to the newsagent, grabbed the last copy of the paper, and what it actually said was: 'Crime-Thriller Writer Wanted for a writer-in-residency at a sculpture project in Sunderland.' Well, I've never done a job; I was really nervy about it, but I sent away for the application form, and got some people to say what a great person I was. Got the interview. I'd gone down a few weeks earlier to meet the sculptors, and whether that helped or not I don't know. So, on this day there was a formal interview in the afternoon, and in the morning we

talked to the sculptors. It was bizarre. One of the sculptors, Colin Wilbourn, always says he feels about his work that there's a story inherent, but that he doesn't necessarily know what it is. It was suggested that he work with a writer. Colin thought about poets and said, 'No.' Well, how about a crime writer? He said, 'Yes.'

"The brief fell into three parts. I had to write a book during the year I was there. I had to work with sculptors to think of ways of incorporating text into the work they were doing. And I also had to go into the community and do workshops, work in schools, and so on. There wasn't a typical day. We operated out of a Portakabin on what was effectively a building site (hence the unusual dedication in *Blood Waters*: 'This may be the first book in history dedicated to a Portakabin'). The lads went outside and worked away. Some days I stayed in the cabin and worked all day on a portable computer; some days I'd visit schools. Whatever... It took us three months to discover a way that a sculptor and a writer could work together on a project. We got there in the end. The project is based along the north bank of the River Wear. There were a load of defunct shipyards there, then demolished. They were turning the dock into a marina; putting up a new campus for the university; and other things as well. The idea behind the sculpture project was that it'd be good for the residents of the area, so they wouldn't feel excluded from all this new development. All the work was historically based."

*Dead of Light* has spawned Chaz Brenchley's first sequel. "When I sent off *Dead of Light*, not knowing how they were going to react to it (one thing's for sure: it was not your straight horror novel) I suppose I was a little bit nervous. My editor phoned after a couple of weeks, and the first thing she said was, 'I want to know what happens to these people.' I said, 'I don't do sequels.' So we talked about other things. About half an hour later I phoned her back and said, 'Would you like a sequel?' Brenchley started working on *Light Errant*. "Everyone at Hodder was keen on the book, and they wanted to redesign the way they were publishing me. I was really excited. They were going to lift my sales by publishing it as a small-format hardback for ten quid, rather than a large format for 15 quid. Everything went through all of its stages. I checked the proofs; sent the proofs back; and six weeks later the first copy of the book arrives..." Unfortunately, the text was riddled with in-house mistakes, but eventually the book came out to Brenchley's satisfaction in 1997, albeit at a higher

price than arranged.

When discussing his work, and his life, he speaks frequently of both financial difficulties and of "serendipity" and of how the latter has often helped him out of the former. Consider, for example, the following, on the subject of research: "I was sitting next to Nick Royle, and we had both recently written about riots. Nick, being the careful-research type, had gone off to the fire brigade to investigate petrol bombs. I had not done that. Instead I went walking around my area of Newcastle, where I bumped into a kid who I knew quite well by then because he'd burgled my flat a couple of times. I started talking to him, and we'd recently had some riots, and in the course of a general chat he told me how to make a petrol bomb. Nick and I had arrived at the same conclusions, but by different routes – and Nick said to me, 'But Chaz, that is research.' And it is, but it's serendipitous: if I hadn't bumped into him, I would have written something quite different."

Brenchley also talks about walking, which clears his head; he has never learnt to drive: "There's a little chapel down the bottom of my street, and this was at a time when the local kids had tired of simply burgling flats; they used to burgle them and then burn them down. It was amazing this place survived. In one of my books it got burned down, and at the point where it got burned down I didn't know who'd done it. There were two obvious characters; it could have been either one. I thought I'd see what seemed more logical at the end. I got to the end; still hadn't made a decision. I went for a walk and thought, there's this other character who's been in the book all along... and it became obvious that that character's role was to burn down the church."

Put them together and what have you got? Financial hardship, serendipity and walking: you've got a way into a new writing project. Or at least, Brenchley did. His new project is a four-volume fantasy epic, going back (at last!) to his teenage interest in the genre. What goes around comes around. The overall title for this work is "Outremer" and the first volume, out now, is *Tower of the King's Daughter*.

"I spent the best part of a year thinking about Outremer – not actively. Doing a little reading. I hit a difficult financial time and thought, Now is the time! However, two things I knew for sure. I did not want to write 'traditional' fantasy: sub-Tolkien. Which meant a) I had to avoid a trilogy; and b) I had to avoid a quest. So I wanted to do four books instead of three; and in order to avoid the quest thing, if I set each book in a

single, separate place, then I wouldn't have that group of people setting off to cover the map." The spark arrived in the form of a leaflet about the Crusades.

"The First Crusade basically achieved everything it was supposed to achieve; it won the Holy Land for Christianity, but because of the construction of it, there were various warlords who had all come from different areas, different ambitions. The land they conquered was set up as four separate states; they made a kingdom of Jerusalem, but the rest were sort of counties. Nominally the whole thing was a kingdom, but there were various powers constantly bickering among themselves. There were wars on all the borders. There was a fundamental looking-back to the land they came from... You've also got two different traditions of magic... not to mention the pre-Islamic myths about djinns and ghouls, and that sort of thing. It was perfect. I was in Waterstone's, flicking through their books on the Middle East, and I saw a map with a particular castle – a hospital castle. T. E. Lawrence went on a walk-

ing tour, all through the Middle East, mapping all the surviving crusader castles. So I had a first volume set entirely inside this castle. It happens to have a tower called the Tower of the King's Daughter, and nobody knows why. I thought: *Tower of the King's Daughter*. Great title. I didn't know what 'King's Daughter' meant. The only thing I knew for sure was that the king did not have a daughter. It was going to be something strange. I needed three more titles, so I made them up without knowing what the fuck they meant. They sounded good. I wrote some background, and then some sample chapters and a synopsis.

"In three or four days I had the whole fucking thing mapped out. I sent all this stuff down to my agent. Within three or four hours of landing on one particular publisher's desk, there was a phone call. It still took a few months for him to commission it, but he did. Things then got complicated because he left the company, which left me without an editor. For two or three months that company conspicuously failed to appoint anyone to take his place. They'd sold the

entire science-fiction and fantasy list to another publisher."

Although confident about the project, Brenchley is "still trying not to get too hopeful. I've raised my hopes so often and been knocked back so often. After all, fantasy readers tend to like the same thing again. That's why people like David Eddings and Terry Brooks are so popular."

I wished him luck – not least because he had recently bought a house (where he lives with two cats) and would have to find the mortgage payments from somewhere. The dictaphone was turned off, and I collected my belongings together in my bag. "Where are you going now?" Brenchley asked. By chance, I was heading on to conduct another interview. I explained. "Oh, he's a darling," was the unabashed reply; "give him my best wishes." I said I would (and later, I did). And then I left and tried to sober up, leaving Brenchley in a near-empty bar with a book. I wanted to stay with him for another hour – to make sure he was okay. But at least he was smiling as I left.

## Interaction

Continued from page 5

such portrayals are in a minority. Most aliens are evil and "good" is synonymous with the traditionalist values of Middle England. Cornell's Britain consists entirely of small country villages untouched by the Industrial Revolution (pollution was just a Seventies problem, Cornell told *Doctor Who Magazine*) and so conveniently unencumbered with the working class. The punks of Cornell's *No Future* are a middle-class parody: "It's like panto, being a punk!" Bernice exclaims at one point. The Church of England is pure *Vicar of Dibley* (a humane, enlightened faith in Cornell's *Timewurm: Revelation and Happy Endings*), while followers of foreign faiths are demonized as not only intolerant and hypocritical but child-abusing too (*Goth Opera*). Sympathetic alien races are the ones who drink warm beer and play cricket.

Worse still is the portrayal of women. There are 131 original *Doctor Who* novels (as of February 1999) and only one author, Kate Orman, is a woman (though there are a small number of short stories in various collections). Orman's contribution to the BBC range is further diluted by collaboration with her husband, Jon Blum. The TV show was rightly criticized for its sexism – the dominant image of women being screaming ankle-twisters even in the late 1980s – but at least they allowed women to play women, not men in drag: according to Cornell, the Doctor's companion Bernice "is like a real woman in that she's who I want

to be, and not who I want to shag." The approach is to butch women up, give them guns, bombs and attitudes. The only attempt to distinguish these ladettes from men is to allow them the occasional opportunity to gossip about boyfriends or pop stars.

The Doctor has been accepted as asexual by some sectors of fandom and in order to explain away his Granddaughter, Virgin replaced sexual reproduction with "Looms" — the excuse given being that Gallifreyan women are barren due to a curse by the Wicked Witch, Pythia – conveniently dissolving the threat of female reproductive power while simultaneously blaming women for it. Women who cannot be assimilated are demonized, as in Russell T. Davies's gynophobic *Damaged Goods*. Companions who indulge in sex are punished with disease, or their partners are killed. When the *Doctor Who* TV Movie actually included several kisses, "New Adventures" writers like Matt Jones were outraged. As recently as *Doctor Who Monthly* 267 (July 1998) Cornell was still unable to accept the Eighth Doctor as fully canonical.

All of the characters are given unhappy childhoods in order to tap into a perceived readership of damaged souls. Genuine social issues are subordinated to "Space Oprah," the soapy emotional outpourings of damaged misfits. Even the Doctor becomes a victim as his increasingly frequent acts of genocide give him the opportunity to wallow in guilt, and although the BBC tried to introduce a companion who was psychologically undam-

aged, Sam did not fit into the authors' mawkish view of teenagers so an alternative history of drug addiction was provided. Lance Parkin, Robert Perry and Rebecca Levene (one-time editor of Virgin's line) have become storyline writers on *Emmerdale* since Gareth Roberts took over there as script editor; previously Roberts had worked on *Coronation Street* alongside Cornell and Matt Jones (there are even *Coronation Street* in-jokes in Roberts' books). This is indicative of the extent to which soap operatics dominate the books.

Worst of all though is the pretentiousness with which the franchise is promoted. Cornell described Roberts's work as "positively Warholesque": in fact, Roberts is recreating an era of *Doctor Who* that he, himself, described as offering "an entirely middle-class view of the world." Henry Jenkins's claim in *Textual Poachers* that fanfiction is a challenge to corporations which hold the copyrights on the popular imagination is often used to legitimate the enterprise too, but this argument falls down because spinoff places fanfiction *back* into the hands of corporations. Several novels and short stories in the series began life in fanzines or on the Internet before being bought by publishers: the "textual poachers" have turned gamekeeper. Far from being the "anarchist subculture" Cornell describes in *License Denied*, these writers are – to use one of Kate Orman's quaint Sixtiesisms – "working for the Man."

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# Angelmakers

*Paul Di Filippo*

**S**now sugared thickly the steeply sloping winter-dead lawn behind the great organically sprawling autonohouse, a white canvas scribbled over with small oblate bootprints and the sharp parallel tracks of sled blades, as well as the shallow worm furrows of lofter saucers. At regular intervals, black-leaved trees with precisely choreographed branches sucked every impinging photon from a December sun pale as a circle of overwashed bleached cotton pegged at the zenith.

Around the house, no activity save routine maintenance and materials-acquisition manifested itself. The house's adults remained busy inside at their ludic labours. Human presence in the landscape consisted of a still line of a dozen children by the edge of the broad frozen river that demarcated the extensive lawn's lower edge. The children on the shore flanked a set of runner tracks that extended onto the ice and terminated at a jagged hole filled with water as coarse and grey as steel wool.

The children wore colourful jellied unisuits thin as pressed-fruit strips, revealing the unisex lines of their pre-adolescent bodies. Their warmly rosy hands appeared bare, save for outlines of shivering air. Perched on their heads, upright or askew, squishy caps exhibited the silly geometries of mirror worlds. Holding their sleds and saucers, or standing beside them, the children silently contemplated the ice-surfaced river and its anomalous disfiguration.

A gentle-looking boy spoke. "She's been under some time now. A minute almost. There are snags down there, I know."

His statement elicited some nervous shuffling and visible expressions of empathy from his peers, except for one rough lad who taunted, "If you don't trust the angels, Rand, dive in yourself."

An exceedingly thin and nervous-looking girl said, "Maybe we should. Or maybe we should call Fabiola's parents." She fingered the rim of the ceramic communion wafer bonded to her wrist without touching its responsive surfaces. "What if the angels are too busy elsewhere?"

"Have you ever known the leucotheans to fail, Shelly?" demanded the second boy.

"No, but I feel so *helpless* just standing here. I want to do something."

"Fabiola won't thank you if you spoil the story of her drowning by horning in on things."

The boy named Rand said defensively, "Are you saying Fabiola planned this, Brewster?"

Brewster made a dismissive wave. "Of course not. Who'd be that daft? But now that it's happened —"

At that moment another child shouted, "Look!" The crowd followed the sentry's outstretched finger with their massed gaze.

As if from directly out of the consumptive sun, a silhouetted figure had detached itself. Swelling from antlike dot to doll-like cutout to human-scaled apparition as it dropped lower, the angel was swiftly upon them. Without hesitation, the angel plunged through the hole in the ice, sending a geyser of cold water upward, droplets bespattering the children. Too thrilled to care, they gave an instinctive collective shout of excitement and relief.

Within seconds the angel emerged from the jagged-edge opening, bearing an unconscious child. Skimming low, the angel landed amidst the children, set the body of Fabiola down in the snow, and kneeled beside the bare-headed blonde girl with the gelid blue face.

Unhesitatingly, the children formed a tight clot around the tableau of kneeling angel and child. Closest by an inch or two, the girl named Shelly peered intensely, her concentration fixed more on the angel than on her unbreathing friend.

The wingless angel was whiter than the ambient snow: platinum hair, ivory limbs. The angelic body displayed no sex, although the angel was completely unclothed. The face of the angel was composed in neutral lines from which perhaps only a depthless sadness, if any emotion whatsoever, could be teased. The angel's eyes were featureless marbles, spheres seemingly composed of polished bone set in the ocular orbits.

The angel kneeled beside Fabiola, but applied no con-

ventional mode of resuscitation. Instead, one arm and hand attenuated ectoplasmically, then snaked through Fabiola's mouth and, apparently, down the girl's throat. The angel's other rarefied hand plunged into the child's chest over her heart like fog through cheesecloth.

Fabiola's body instantly arced like the tensioned arm of a loaded catapult, head and heels digging into the snow. The stolid angel remained seemingly unmoved, but withdrew those intrusive extensions, which resumed humaniform solidity. Fabiola spewed river water, gagged, then sucked in a shuddering breath, while the angel ran soothing hands up the girl's frame, ending with hands clasping the girl's head on either side.

Fabiola's eyes snapped open. Her gaze locked with the angel's blank fixity. At the same time Shelly strained forward, as if she were a bob on an invisible elastic line connecting victim and rescuer. The tableau held for a few eternal seconds, then shattered as the angel let the snowy depression again receive Fabiola's head. Somehow the angel leaped directly from a kneeling posture into the sky.

Fabiola sat up weakly; both Rand and Brewster moved to support her, and the other children clustered closer to hear the first words from their revivified peer, a weak "I've come back."

All except Shelly. Shading her eyes, the wan girl watched the angel until that never-speaking being had long disappeared.

In coupling class, Rand and Fabiola lay sated on mussed white sheets draping a low carnalounge. Fabiola's newly mature body had developed along her chosen lines of feminine curvature. Rand's form likewise had fructified into a desirably ripe, slim-hipped maleness. Together, languorous limbs entangled, they resembled one of the 300-year-old Bouguereaus they had studied last quintmester in art-history class. In ranks across the copulatorium, other couched couples replicated their easy indolence.

Adjacent to Fabiola and Rand on their own divan, Shelly and Brewster were lone exceptions to the class's ruling somatopsychic fulfilment. Brewster, his innate truculence now compounded by an overdeveloped physique, rested on his back, a frown dragging his face down, arms folded across his inordinately hairy chest. Her slim lily of a body the least mature among her classmates, Shelly reclined on her side, spine convexed toward her partner, arms bowed over her head. Now Brewster spoke more loudly than was deemed polite within the copulatorium. Rand and Fabiola could not help overhearing.

"Damn it, girl. A little enthusiasm wouldn't be out of place."

A soft "I'm sorry" wisped out from the cage of Shelly's arms like an escaping ghost.

Rand was not placated. "Sorry won't cut it any more. Why, if you were my only partner, I'd have a knot the size of houseroot in my libido." The burly youth swung his feet to the floor and stepped over to the neighbouring lounge. "On your way, Rand. I'm cutting in."

Both Fabiola and Rand graciously consented. Her spill of golden hair whispering on the sheets, the lush Fabi-

ola accepted the impetuous Brewster into her embrace, while Rand slipped onto the couch where Shelly still cringed. As Fabiola and Brewster began to engage, Rand slid a comforting arm around Shelly's shoulder. She spun about and relaxed into the offered cradle of his shoulder and chest, pressing her face against him.

"Want to talk about anything?" asked Rand quietly. "Something special bothering you?"

"I just worry all the time, Rand. I can't explain it, but it interferes with everything, not just sex."

"What concerns you? Your future? It's perfectly natural for young people our age to be a little worried about exactly what playwork we'll eventually choose."

"No, it's not my personal future. I'm fairly clear about that. I want to be a theresan."

Rand forbore to comment on this rather unconventional choice. "What then?"

Shelly gripped Rand's waist tightly. "I – I worry about the people I care for. Their health, their safety – their lives. It's all I can think about, ever since – ever since Fabiola drowned."

For several seconds, Rand said nothing. Then: "But that was five years ago, Shelly."

"You needn't remind me! I've lived every hellish preoccupied minute of it!"

"Well, it's just – don't you think you should seek a detangling?"

"If I remain knotted much longer, I will. But I just want to puzzle it out by myself for a while yet."

"It's so odd, though." Rand sounded genuinely perplexed. "To have such an archaic fear in this age of angels."

At the mention of angels, Shelly stiffened. "They're the problem. They make our mortality more real at the same time they guard us from accidents. We've all come to rely on them so much, that we've lost a lot of old instincts of self-preservation. What if their perfection is flawed? Considering where they come from – 'such base and hybrid clay.'"

Rand balked at entering that seldom-trodden territory, the origin of the angels, and swerved instead into literary criticism. "You're quoting Athanor. He's not to my taste."

Beside them, Fabiola and Brewster were noisily climaxing. The communion wafer on Fabiola's dangling wrist clacked rhythmically against the tiled floor. Rand found himself aroused. Upon Shelly's shy acknowledgement of his condition, he began to caress her. Quickly, they started to move together.

Their formal evaluation at the end of class cited as a demerit only Shelly's postcoital tears.

Alternately steamy and chill, cleansing mists billowed from the wallpoles of the dimly lit freeform sauna. Subtle restorative natural fragrances and amygdaloïds rode the droplets: balsam, vanilla, altozest. Self-segregating instinctively by sex, boys and girls clustered mostly in separate grottoes, as if after the intimacies of coupling class certain male and female intrabonding required reinforcing. Giggles and laughter interspersed boisterous talk.

Seated on the absorptive floor, Shelly braced her back against a pliable wall, drew her knees up to her chin and crossed her ankles in front of her sex. She made no move to join in any of the conversations around her. She passed most of the sauna session in contemplative silence, until Fabiola approached her. The smiling blonde girl dropped down gracefully beside the sombre dark-haired one. Shelly's tentative expression mixed a faint welcome with a nearly palpable disinclination to talk. Fabiola ignored the look.

"I hear you've decided on a career," said Fabiola.

Visibly surprised, Shelly answered, "Why, yes, I have."

Fabiola paused, then said, "Being a theresan seems an awfully – well, a harsh and stringent path."

Shelly's face now expressed an indignation matched by her tone. "How can you say that? Devoting yourself entirely to the spiritual welfare of others? It's the most fulfilling career I can imagine."

"But the libido-dampers, the vow of minimal consumption – it all seems so purposelessly self-denying in the face of our abundance."

"Maybe so. Maybe people nowadays have all the sex and food and toys they need. But there's still suffering. Death and mortal dissatisfaction resist all unknotting. The vows are real, but also symbolic. They focus our attention, help us concentrate on our mission of relieving pain. The therens are only one step below the angels themselves."

Fabiola evinced nervousness at such a comparison. "Well, I won't pretend you aren't suited for such a life, Shel. Ever since we were little, you've inclined that way."

Shelly neither affirmed nor denied this characterization. Suffused in soothing veils of moisture, the friends rested wordlessly side by side for a minute. Then Fabiola spoke.

"Don't you want to know what I've chosen for my play-work?"

Shelly brightened. "Of course. I hadn't realized you'd decided yet."

"I'm majoring in exobiological research, specializing in Leucothean lifeforms with a concentration on hybridology."

"Will you have to go discontinuous to visit Leucothea?"

"Of course, if I choose to travel at all, which I probably will. How else would I cross all those lightyears?"

Shelly shuddered. "I could never put myself through such an experience, even if it is temporary. Losing your body that way –"

Fabiola laughed off her friend's apprehensions. "It's perfectly safe. Just a matter of not being where you were for a while until the universe is tickled into agreeing you're ready to be elsewhere." Changing the subject, Fabiola asked, "Who do you like better, Rand or Brewster?"

A look of bemused consternation squalled across Shelly's features. "Rand is so kind to me. There's no denying that, or his charm. But Brewster has something that pulls at me, a demanding quality that's almost frightening."

"You should be nicer to him then. More appreciative."

"I try. But I get distracted too often." Shelly bit her

underlip. "Fabiola – do you ever recall your death?"

Fabiola laughed easily. "My death? I'm right here beside you! How could I have ever died?"

"But you did. You drowned. Your heart was stopped until the angel restarted it."

Ignoring Shelly's speech, Fabiola fluffed up her abundant damp curls. "The sauna always butchers my hair! I'm definitely going to speak to the mockie-proctors about altering the proteinoid mix in the final rinse."

From across the form-strewn chamber, as if across a vision of some steam-cloaked afterlife, a desultory Elysian Fields, Brewster and Rand more or less discreetly watched the two girls. In relaxed fashion, Rand stood leaning against a wall, arms folded across his hairless chest; contrarily, Brewster twisted energetically from the waist up in an exaggerated display of calisthenics, snapping his limbs about.

"Gaia!" exclaimed Brewster. "Fabiola gets me so primed! Look at her breasts arch as she primpers her hair! What a kick."

Rand's tone was dry. "You two certainly seemed on the same protocol in class. Do you expect to see much of her after graduation?"

Brewster ceased swivelling and began to trot in place, coincident with a blast of cold. "Not likely. The one drawback with Fab from my point of view is her excessive brains. She's off for more schooling, which is certainly not the case with me."

Rand straightened away from the wall, plainly intrigued. "Oh? This is news. I had no idea your future plans were so solid. Tell all, please."

"I've already signed on with the Rewilderness Institute. They promised me my choice of assignment after a short training stint. I'm leaning toward the Sacramento Rainforest."

"A noble mission."

"Noble my prickly arse! I just can't stand being cooped up in these prissy modern safety zones any more. I want to be surrounded by some wildness, to use my muscles more than my head."

"Engineered wildness. And of course the angels will still be watching over you and your mates."

Brewster snorted like a guard minotaur. "Don't remind me. There's no place free from their intrusive ways. The damn seraphian layer girdles the whole globe like a straitjacket, put into place long before our generation had a say in it."

Rand smiled. "An interesting comparison. Most people compare the turbulent home of our angel friends to a vital safety net."

"Most people are lazy, complacent fools. A warm autonohome, uninterrupted entertainment, and the cackle of the flock. That's enough to make them happy."

"Cheep, cheep."

Brewster stopped jogging. "Be fair now, you know I don't mean you. You're a good friend, Rand. You and me, Fabiola and Shelly – we have some kind of special bond among us. I predict we'll always hang together somehow."

"Sentimentality and a nod toward the future. This must be that 'maturity' I've heard so much about."

"Joke all you want, dummy. And by the way, I haven't learned *your* plans yet. Maybe you and Fabiola have some kind of zingy co-hab agreement."

"Not at all. But we *are* going to the same school next year."

"A-ha! Don't tell me you're going to muck about with squirmy aliens too."

"No. Not unless you count Jovian volatiles as such."

Brewster shouted his approval and slapped Rand on the back hard enough to cause the slighter boy to stagger a step. "So it's to be mining after all! Congratulations! And you let me rave on about my shirt-pocket wilderness! Out among the stars, there's the real frontier."

Rand spoke modestly. "Oh, most of the work is done from Earth via d-links. And on-site autonoclaques handle much of the rest. I doubt I'll find myself in space more than a few times a year."

"More than most of the rest of us. Well, if it weren't for needing to feel the wind on my face, Rand, I'd join you in a minute."

Rand quoted their secular scripture only half-archly: "Each seeker his own guide."

Brewster delivered the expected well-circulated parody: "Each thrillseeker his own androgyne."

The roof of the school was generally off-limits. Its attractions were minimal – a perch from which to pelt innocent passersby with popbeads from the pepper trees, a generous view of the landscaped community and the river where Fabiola had nearly met her end – and consequently, so was any temptation to trespass. But this evening, with the end of the official commencement celebrations at midnight, the lure of the forbidden drew some dozen graduates unwilling to call an end to their revelry.

Rand concentrated on jiggering the school's heuristics, chattering at the building in high-level autonopidgin. At his back, his festively dressed companions shuffled and whispered. Tristan and Alana, a pair of lovers bound for the Black Gang, kissed with professional abandon. A fellow named Ewen let out a fart, saying, "Let the school parse that!"

Rand worked intently despite the distractions. "Damn stubborn mockie – There! We're in."

Everyone gave a cheer then, heedless of discovery. All the young men and women exhibited varying degrees of amygdaloid intoxication – nothing illegal, but more than was perhaps wise of the permitted stuff. Half the intruders raced up the stairs, vying with those in the loftier shaft to be first; the two factions burst out onto the node-studded roof almost simultaneously. Above, a wealth of stars prickled. June breezes carried the scents of water and grass. The happy trespassers rushed to the low parapet edging the roof, the only real focus of the scene. Some ten meters below, the well-lighted town slept.

Rand encircled Fabiola's bare midriff with his left arm. She pressed her hip against him. Brewster and Shelly stood rather stiffly side by side, although holding hands. Squirts full of wine circulated; by the time one reached Brewster, its overused muscles, at the ebb

of their refreshing cycle, refused to work, and only a couple of drops escaped the living valve. Brewster threw the squirt down squishily in exaggerated disgust.

"Bah! Who needs alcohol on a night like tonight? Just to be free of this dump forever is intoxicating enough!"

Releasing Shelly's hand, Brewster leaped atop the parapet and began to dance like a marionette proxied by someone being tickled to death. Everyone cheered and applauded except Shelly. Even in the dim starlight and backscattered radiance of the street illuminants her expression of alarm shone like a young moon.

"No, Brewster! It's dangerous! Come down!"

As if his imaginary strings had been dipped in liquid nitrogen, Brewster instantly froze. He stared meanly at Shelly for a few interminable seconds, then said, "You don't own me, Shel. And there is no danger anywhere any more."

With those words, he hurled himself backwards off the roof.

Shelly screamed, as did several others, not including Rand or Fabiola. Craning forward, the young men and women watched Brewster plummet.

Halfway in his swift fall, an angel materialized beneath him. The alabaster being caught Brewster easily and lowered him safely to the ground.

Rand spoke precisely, in the parodic tones of a lecturer, but failed entirely to mask deeper feelings. "Unlike our long-range, machine-based d-links, the angels of course can go discontinuous organically and at will. However, the energy-burden such actions place on them limit them to one or at the most two ionosphere-to-troposphere jumps between downtimes back in the seraphian layer –"

His humorous pedanticism went disregarded, as his peers clambered to the parapet and jumped in squealing imitation of Brewster. Each of course met midair rescue. The flock of enigma-faced marmoreal angels flew away conventionally as each jumper was grounded. Finally, only Shelly, Rand and Fabiola remained on the roof. Rand exhibited a cool disdain, while Fabiola's eyes shone with an aloof excitement. Shelly, though, quivered with rage and the aftermath of her fear.

Rand moved to embrace her, saying, "Juvenile behaviour, of course – really wasteful of seraphian resources – but you have to make some allowances –"

Shelly bucked out of his offered consoling clutches. "I hate him! I hate you all!" She raced off down the stairs, out the school and down the streets.

Fabiola watched her go, then said, "Hardly the proper attitude for the start of her career as a martyr."

Fabiola's office-cum-playlab occupied a congeries of expandable Hoberman spheres in the middle of Los Angeles, conveniently close to the main So-Cal d-link off-world transit centre. Currently, the complex swelled half-again as large as it nearest neighbour: the Leucothean Institute had mounted a new expedition recently to underexplored regions of the distant world whence came the objects of Fabiola's researches.

When the building announced a visitor that morning, Fabiola paused abruptly in the middle of her work as if

the significant yet unexpected name had jarred her concentration.

"Send her up."

Waiting for the arrival of her visitor, Fabiola closed down the experiment she had been working on that morning. Tapping staccato codes into her communion wafer with her stylus nail, she induced quiescence in the leucotherarium inhabitants. Behind the glass walls of the sealed alien environment, amorphous shapes, their metabolisms damped, pooled on their moss-furred cage floor like heaps of coddled egg-whites.

Fabiola stepped from playlab to outer office. She entered just in time to greet her visitor.

Shelly appeared thinner than when Fabiola had last seen her childhood friend. Under the libido-blockers, her body seemed to have devolved to pre-adolescence wispyness, as if time's arrow had reversed for her alone. A cloud of anxiety fogged her features.

Fabiola swiftly and heartily embraced her friend. "What a pleasant surprise, Shel! It's been what, three years? Here, take a seat."

Unresponsive to Fabiola's pleasantries, Shelly collapsed into a chair. "I've been dropped from the there-sans, Fabiola. Me and hundreds of others."

"Oh, that's awful! But why?"

"Reduced call for our services. A happier world needs fewer empathetic companions – or so people delude themselves into thinking. Dealing with the shrinkage, the order has applied a strict 'last in, first out' policy. Frankly, I'm surprised the axe didn't fall on me last year at this time."

Taking a seat beside Shelly, Fabiola grasped her hand. "I'm so sorry. What will you do now?"

Shelly pinned Fabiola with the intensity of her gaze. "I can't simply abandon my calling, just because I've lost institutional support. But I can't continue on my own either. So I've applied to the angelmakers. The demand for *their* services, at least, is still strong."

Fabiola's face registered baffled incredulity. "I don't understand."

"How much more clearly can I say it? I've put my name in to become an angel."

Clearly agitated, Fabiola stood up. "Along with criminals and the incorrigibly suicidal? You're neither of those, are you, Shelly? How could you do such a thing?"

Grimly thinning her lips, Shelly countered, "Every year a few sane and responsible individuals make the same choice. It's not unprecedented."

Fabiola began to pace. "This news upsets me terribly. You're throwing your individuality away. And for what?"

"If I can't save people's souls, at least I can still safeguard their bodies. That's all they seem to care about anyway."

Growing more distressed, Fabiola asked, "Why are you telling me all this? It's an incredible burden! I almost wish you had just vanished."

Shelly smiled for the first time. "You think mere knowledge of my choice is a burden? Well, I'm about to ask for much more. I want you and Rand and Brewster to be present at the transformation. It's my privilege to have three witnesses."

Colour bled from Fabiola's face. "Witness it? I – I can't!"

"Why not? You deal with leucothean lifeforms every day."

"But not hybrids!"

Shelly got up awkwardly from her seat. "Too bad your sensibilities are so refined, dear. I enjoin you to be there, and I know you won't refuse. I assume you're still in contact with the men."

"Yes, of course. I saw both of them just last month."

"I expect to find you all there then. I'll send the particulars as soon as I learn them."

Shelly moved toward the door. Automatically, Fabiola accompanied her. At the door, Shelly turned, gripped Fabiola by her upper arms, and brought her face to within inches of the other woman's.

"You've often claimed you loved me, Fab. Prove it now."

Shelly kissed Fabiola fiercely, released her, and left. Fabiola wiped her lips as if they burned.

Sealed from outside contamination – or interior escape – the operating theatre was staffed only by sophisticated mechanisms, partly autonomous, partly telefactored by the hidden, anonymous cadre of angelmakers. Now alertly inactive, the mobile surgical units awaited their initiating commands. The sole human inhabitant of the theatre lay naked upon a comfortable monitor-and-assist platform. As yet untouched, Shelly's thin pale body – stark ribs, hairless mons, composed expression – seemed already well on its way to angelhood. Arms resting laxly along her sides, she stared upward with concentrated fixity.

Beside the patient an opaque sealed canister sat in isolation from the other equipment, a grail-like focus of vision for the assembled watchers.

The ceiling of the lighted theatre was transparent. Beyond this barrier, in cloaking darkness and ringing the edge of the theatre, seats with full non-interventionist telemetry held medical students, professors, and Shelly's three witnesses. Fabiola was flanked by her two friends. Rand, to her left, held her hand. On her other side, Brewster sat with arms folded like logs across his chest. Rand's expressive face revealed an inner tumult mixing fascination, dismay and a sorrowful nostalgia. Fabiola's countenance expressed pure despair. Brewster exhibited an angry scowl, as if personally affronted. Amidst the murmurous audience, his sudden exclamation registered as an egregious slap.

"Damn her! She's deserting us! Is she really that weak?"

"That weak?" Rand repeated. "Why not 'that strong'? Could you undergo such a transformation?"

"Why not ask if I could have my legs sawed off for no good reason? It's not bravery in either case, just masochistic stupidity."

Fabiola's voice was pitched higher than normal. "Will you two just shut up! Show some respect for Shelly's commitment. Please."

Brewster opened his mouth to reply, then obviously thought better of such a move. He braced his implacable arms more firmly. Rand squeezed Fabiola's hand more tightly and pecked her brow with a kiss, but she

seemed to esteem his solicitous affection no more highly than she did Brewster's truculence.

The machines in the theatre suddenly stirred to life. Ignoring the offered close-up telemetry, Fabiola bent forward, as if only unmediated vision across the shortest possible distance could sanctify this transaction. Unwittingly, Rand and Brewster mimicked her.

Below, Shelly had already received a local sensory block across her sternum that still left her completely conscious. Surely her light-swamped eyes could not discern any of the watchers above, yet her expectant gaze seemed locked on theirs. Now clamps and blood-flow inhibitors came into play, as a small incision was laseried into her side, revealing the common human scarlet wetness.

As if unable to interpose a censor between his thoughts and his speech, Rand whispered, "Buddhists claim Shakyamuni was born of such a wound in his mother's side. But Christians honour the piercing of a spear in the torso of a crucified Jesus."

The sealed canister now resided in a mechanical grip. Obedient to the application of a security code, the canister top began to unscrew itself, as if its living contents sought egress on their own. The spatulate limb of a mechanical poised itself above the lid, ready to cap the vessel. When the lid had fully disengaged and the spatulate blocker had slid into place, the container was brought nearly into contact with Shelly's incision. Then the intervening shield-hand withdrew.

The observers saw in the tiny slice of space between the vessel and the body the merest suggestion of a sentient pulsing gelatinous influx. Quickly, the container was pulled away, while at the same time a transparent shell rose up from within the M&A platform to fully enclose the patient.

Beneath this perspex carapace, Shelly began instantly to metamorphose.

The lips of her incision drew closed of their own volition. Her stomach swelled noticeably, then just as significantly concaved, as the leucothean lifeform introduced into her abdomen swiftly absorbed organs, bloated, then shrunk into extensions that blew through her like a wind of pure somatic change. The expression on Shelly's face betokened no pain, just shock, and then, amazingly, a species of bliss. Her eyes rolled back into their sockets; when they revolved again a full minute later, they revealed themselves transmuted into the flinty optic roundels of all angels. Attenuating and wavering, her limbs went through various test modes of ectoplasmic configuration before settling down to the angelic perfection of human similitude.

Most astonishingly, Shelly's body began to float above the M&S pedestal, constrained only by the clear lid.

Above, in the observation galley, Fabiola began to retch. Brewster struck the dome of the theatre a resounding blow. Rand sought tranquillity in dull recitation of facts.

"The imago will automatically seek the global seraphian layer and the company of its kind. The canopy prevents its flight until it can be brought into the open. Already the new angel is part of the leucothean group

mentation, able to detect and respond to human distress in all its forms via contact with our wafers along non-local dimensions –"

Fabiola turned and slapped Rand's face. Brewster restrained her from further assault, but needlessly, for she slumped into her seat in tears.

Rand massaged his rubescent cheek. "Such a simple operation in theory, but fraught with more than its share of emotional complications."

Rand beneath her, Brewster above, Fabiola performed slow gyrations upon the twin fleshy impalements of their cocks thickening inside her. Brewster had his inner elbows locked beneath her axillaries, hands clamped behind her neck; Rand cupped her pendulous breasts. Entrained in lubricious synchronous routines, the threesome resembled in their fluid unity some tripartite hybrid not entirely dissimilar to the dualistic being which had come into life just hours ago in the surgical theatre beneath their rapt gaze.

The trio's movements accelerated with their growing urge toward completion. Inter-responsive sounds escaped the participants: from Fabiola, a cascade of panting mewls; from Brewster, coarse-grained grunts; from Rand, soothing wordless encouragements. Within speedy minutes, their orgasms spilled over the barrier separating potential from actualized, guttural howls an operatic accompaniment to the release. Brewster slumped sideways over onto the mattress, pulling Fabiola with him and thus levering Rand onto his side: six legs tangled like the limp fronds of sea plants.

For a time, until they regained an ease of breathing, they did not speak. Then Brewster broke the silence.

"I should have been kinder to her. I see that now. But I was an ignorant brute."

Unlinked from her lovers, Fabiola rolled over onto her back, pulling the men into a cradling embrace on either side. She said, "Kinder? Perhaps. But I doubt that any of us could have dissuaded Shelly."

Brewster growled. "Of course, I blame the angelmakers too. They should have refused her as an unstable volunteer."

"What other kind would they ever get?" Rand wryly asked.

Fabiola suddenly said, "No one's innocent. We're all angelmakers."

Brewster rose up on one elbow, glaring. "What?"

"I mean that the four of us had a unique dynamic that drove Shelly to her fate. And also that our society as a whole demanded her transformation. We planted a slow virus of ideation within her during childhood, and it finally came awake and transcribed itself."

Brewster dropped back down. "I don't know if I buy that, Fab."

"It's true nonetheless."

Rand's voice held a genuine perplexity. "Do you remember, Brew, something you said years ago, when we were still in school? That the four of us made a whole? Why don't I feel a missing part now?"

"I suppose because Shelly's still out there in some form."

Fabiola volunteered, "The findings are still imprecise

regarding how much individual mentation remains after hybridization."

Rand shuddered. "Not much I hope."

Brewster sat up suddenly, as if struck by inspiration. "Let's memorialize this day. I propose that every year on the anniversary of Shelly's ascension, we spend a holiday together."

"I second the motion," said Rand.

Fabiola gripped both their hands. "It's unanimous. In memory of Shelly, a school reunion each year."

Brewster wedged his big hand into her wet crotch, enfolding her whole sex back to her anus. "And you'll be our homecoming queen."

"And you the jester," suggested Rand.

They all laughed before they all kissed.

Brewster seemed as proud of the Sacramento Rainforest as if he himself had planted each of its towering black-leaved trees, artfully draped each of its sensate lianas, animated each of its animals, programmed each of its buzzing bugs. Conducting Fabiola and Rand down one of the region's many public trails, hot sunlight butterscotching their bare arms, he lectured in an earnest manner most unlike his bluff self outside this artificial wilderness, delivering anecdotes, statistics and philosophy.

"You'd never believe you were walking through what was once a metropolitan concentration, now would you? Just carting away the demolition debris to the plasma incinerators took the better part of a decade. But currently you won't find more than a few score people at any given time within a hundred-mile radius. A handful of daytrippers, some hikers and overnight campers, and a smattering of guides such as myself. One minute."

Brewster had halted by a tree with a diseased limb. He bent to its base and began scraping away dead leaves from around the trunk. After a few swipes, he exposed the tree's inset partner to the communion wafer in his wrist. Mating his wafer to the wood-rimmed one, Brewster internalized the feed, then stood.

"Nothing out of the ordinary. Just planned rot."

Rand effortlessly shrugged off his bulky pack, revealing a patch of sweaty shirt fabric beneath. "Lofters may have solved the weight problem, but I've yet to wear a pack that truly breathes."

Fabiola chimed in with her own complaint. "My feet are absolutely aching. How much farther, Brew?"

"Just a mile or so. I swear, you two youngsters should apply for early systemic reboots. I had a couple of booters in here last week – 90 years old if they were a day – and they didn't chaff me as much as you two."

Rand pulled his pack on again with an exaggerated show of self-sacrifice. "Can we help it if desk-play has made me and Fab soft? We can't all spend every day slogging through the muck and mire like you do. Some of us have a civilization to run."

Brewster snorted. "Poking alien slimebags in cages in one case, and guiding giant gasbags into orbit in the other. Such noble pursuits. Let's go, and no more bitching."

Brewster's "mile or so" proved closer to five. But the sight at the end proved inspiring: a luxuriant greensward rolling at a slight inclination toward a posted but

unbarricaded cliff edge.

Brewster tapped his wafer with quick codes. "I'll shut off the warnings from those posts while we're here. I think we're all mature enough not to tumble over the edge."

Shucking their packs onto the lawn, the three friends strolled toward the land's edge. Attaining this stanchion-dotted terminus, they saw the boulder-studded Sacramento River churning turbulently some 50 feet below, a muddy snake writhing in digestion, death or birth.

"The Rewilderness Institute has upped the flow for rafting season. If you two could have spared me more than a single day –"

"But we couldn't," said Fabiola decisively. "So let's enjoy our picnic and not spoil it with 'might have beens.'"

They retreated several yards from the dropoff and began to spread a feast from the contents of their packs. Soon, a large blanket played host to a dozen dishes, hot and cold. Rand popped the cork on a bottle of champagne, and poured portions into the glasses outheld by his companions. After filling his own, he proposed a toast.

"To Shelly, now five years gone, wherever she may be."

Glasses clinked, and were drained off. Fabiola swiped a finger past the corner of one eye, then smiled and said, "I'm starving. Let's eat."

Sprawled laughing on the blanket with his friends, Rand had a chicken leg halfway to his mouth when he froze as if an icicle had replaced his spine. He touched his wafer uselessly. "Oh sweet Gaia..."

The others reacted to his alarm. "What is it, Rand?" "Spill it, boy!"

Rand stood up, his face pale. "It's a call from my Institute. All off-duty personnel to report immediately. But there's no point. You'll learn why any minute yourself."

The general alert came through to Brewster and Fabiola within seconds. Rand nodded at their dismay.

"Billions of tons of Jovian volatiles on a collision course with the planet. An unprecedented d-link mis-reception. Estimated area of impact, middle of the North American west coast. Estimated energy release, two point five tunguskas. Estimated time of atmospheric entry, 90 seconds."

They had no time for any action save throwing themselves to the ground and hugging each other.

A noise like the fabric of spacetime ripping assaulted them. The horizon lit up as if a second sun had been born. A hot wind from a hotter hell arrived, and the ground flapped like a bedsheet hung out in hurricane.

Torn treelims whipped past the three people. Ripped apart, the humans themselves rolled toward the cliff edge.

A stanchion caught Fabiola in the gut. Frantically she clawed at it, managing to wrap her arms around it. It tilted out of its socket, but held at a rakish angle.

The shaking earth eventually ceased its convulsions. Warily, Fabiola released her grip on the pole, crawled a few inches away from the cliff, and stood. She spat an oyster of bright blood, then looked about for Rand and Brewster.

The men were nowhere in sight.

She advanced cautiously but anxiously to the crumbling edge of the greensward. In the river, she thought to discern two bobbing heads and an occasional flailing arm.

Fabiola looked into the sky. "The angels," she mur-



# MUTANT POPCORN

Nick Lowe

*Star Trek: Insurrection*  
the Ba'ku settlement resembles  
nothing so much as a premium-rate new-age  
healing resort for resting daytime TV actors...

These antemillennial times are big days for religious movies, and they're getting weirder. But I still haven't seen the story told behind what is surely the year's strangest film event, so you'll need to bear with a brief trainspotterly dip into the preincarnate life of *What Dreams May Come*.

In nutshell, the main significance of *Dreams* is as the debut production of what is in effect the first overtly religious organization to produce large-budget Hollywood movies: an outfit called Metafilmics, whose declared mission is to bring new-age metaphysics to the screen. Its senior partner is one Stephen Simon, who in his earlier life as Stephen Deutsch produced Richard Matheson's novel *Bid Time Return* as the moderately successful 1980 film *Somewhere in Time*. In the process, the young Deutsch fell under the legendary sf maverick's personal, professional and (slightly improbably) spiritual spell, and eagerly optioned the second fantasy romance Matheson was working on to be the team's followup to *Somewhere in Time*.

That novel, it turned out, was *What Dreams May Come*, surely one of the nuttiest works ever written by a big sf name. For many people, and for more than one reason (v. infra), it's the last Matheson novel they ever read, occupying a similar role in its author's oeuvre to *The Land of Mist* in Conan Doyle's: a sincere, leaden spiritualist protreptic lightly draped in novelistic clothing, demonstrating convincingly to anyone persistent enough to finish it that the author's

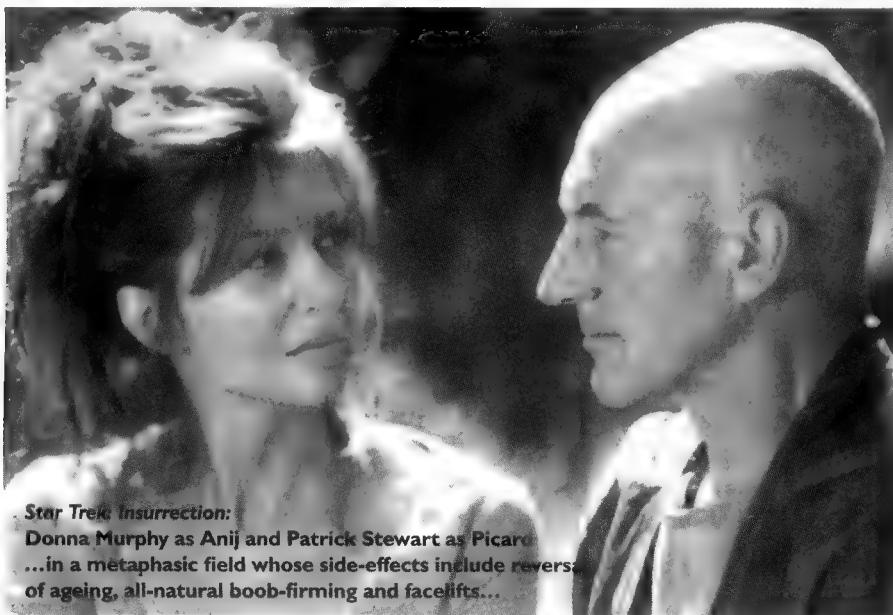
marbles have gone on permanent overseas loan. (It also coincides, for reasons invidious to conjecture, with the virtual end of Matheson's own movie-writing career.) An overtly non-fictional followup *The Path: Metaphysics for the 1990s* (Capra Books, 1993) was also reissued to tie in with the movie's release. (Metafilmics, meanwhile, thrives, and is currently working on a TV series with Coppola.)

Now, Matheson's original novel is nothing if not heartfelt. It's book-ended in authenticating paratexts: an introduction vowing that only the characters are made up, and a lavish bibliography of a hundred-odd theosophical, spiritualist, and early new-age tracts. Dedicated to Ruth Matheson with a quotation from the narrator's climactic monologue, the novel is undisguisedly autobiographical. Its lead is a middle-aged screenwriter increasingly impatient with the commercial fluff he churns out for television, only to find his midlife career angst abruptly terminated by vehicle collision, and his soul catapulted into a very manicured, very Californian afterlife – where hell is a place of dented car doors, leaky roofs, faded carpets, and the climactic test has our dauntless hero descend into the abyss and open the REFRIGERATOR DOOR. "The sight repelled me. Wilted lettuce, dry, white cheese, stale bread, yellow-edged mayonnaise, an almost empty bottle of dark red wine..." (My wife fell about: "Hell is exactly like our house.")

Unfilmable in the extreme, it's only come to the screen because, bizarre as

this seems to anyone outside movieland, it has the status of a sacred text for certain people in the business. Stephen Simon contributed a gushing apostolic afterword to Tor's tie-in reprint of the novel last year, and it makes for remarkable reading. Among other things, it reports the unsettling fact that the novel is used in the producer's circle of acquaintance as a kind of hospicing text. "Many people have read this book for the first time literally as they entered the last days or even hours of their lives. For example, the mother of a dear friend of mine was dying of cancer. The woman was terrified of death because she had never been exposed to a belief system which held life as a passage between incarnations and other realms of consciousness. I gave this book to my friend who read it and passed it on to her mother. Her mother's entire demeanor changed. Her fear passed. When she did 'cross over' a few days later, my friend was at her side and reported to me that her mother was peaceful and even anticipatory in those last few moments."

And if the book's principal undoing is its sincerity, that of the movie is the producers' apparent determination that their film should remain as faithful as possible to its source. More clumsily written than one would expect from its author, Matheson's novel is vanishingly thin on narrative, consisting largely of swathes of expository metaphysics from guardian angel Albert to the newly-deceased narrator, and only begins to sprout its *Night Land*-ish plot in the



Star Trek: Insurrection:

Donna Murphy as Anij and Patrick Stewart as Picard... in a metaphasic field whose side-effects include reversal of ageing, all-natural boob-firming and facelifts...

second half. To hack some shape into this resistant material, the film version has engaged no less than the prolific Ron Bass, an A-list screenwriter with no track record in fantasy, whose principal credits are in earnest projects for power-list actors like *Rain Man* and *Stepmom*. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Bass proves quite unequal to the job, bolstering the ropey metaphysics with precisely the kind of gruesome therapy-speak that makes actors smile and audiences shudder, and trimming the dialogue down to inspirational soundbites from *The Little Book of the Dead*. ("The reality is it's over when you stop wanting to hurt her," "Good people go to hell because they can't forgive themselves," and the transcendently ghastly "Sometimes when you win, you lose.") The novel's climax, where our hero delivers a five-page farewell monologue to his lost Eurydice, has been faithfully preserved ("I need to talk to you, and you don't have to respond"), if mercifully rewritten from scratch.

It may not all be Bass's fault, because as often in these long-gestating projects there's a palimpsestic quality to the plot that suggests the lingering ghostly presence of earlier plotlines and solutions. (No fewer than nine Creative Consultants to Bass and director Vincent Ward are credited, alongside a small army of Assistants-To each.) Certainly the screenplay gives the not-inappropriately destabilizing and dreamlike impression of a collage of different drafts which has never really made its mind up, for example, whether to use the Cuba Gooding Albert, the new Max von Sydow character, or Williams' dead son as the Virgil figure – and defers any decision by bewilderingly merging all three. In fact, killing off the kids is itself an awkward innova-

tion of the film, apparently all so that a happy nuclear family can be reassembled in heaven forever. The blink-and-miss-it non-denominational eschatology ("Where's God in all this?" "Oh, He's up there, somewhere, shouting down that He loves us, wondering why we can't hear Him") is much as in the book, but the sentence for suicides has been extended from natural life to eternity, for reasons explained in an unintelligible combination of fiat and mumbo-jumbo ("It's reality and the way it works. Each of us has an instinct that there's a natural order to our journey. Annie didn't accept that.")

The one contributor who comes out of the whole bizarre slosh unscathed is Ward, whose direction comes as near to genius as anything in recent sf cinema. The actors don't respond as well as everything else, and it's a bit mean to saddle a Hollywood first-timer with the near-undirectable Robin Williams, who isn't really up to the role anyway. But it's wonderful to see the most visionary antipodean film-maker since Peter Weir finally get his hands on the full toolbox, and if the price of initiation is that you have to deal with Williams and prove you can make gold from ordure, then so be it. Ward it was, among much else, who came up with the key idea of making the lost wife a painter/restorer specializing in 19th-century visionary landscapes, allowing the director and his team of conceptual artists to paper heaven in *tableaux vivants* from Friedrich, Martin and Cole. Unexpectedly, Hell is actually less fun than heaven, perhaps because Ward has over-asserted his own rather distinctive lines of imagery: the sea of faces, the ship, the inverted cathedral. But it's still a landmark film in the genre, a movie peopled almost entirely with images of a richness that have hitherto been the exclusive preserve of

the written word and the novelistic imagination; and anyone looking to produce a movie of *A Voyage to Arcturus* or *The House on the Borderland* will at least know what call to make first. It's simultaneously a heroic triumph and a monumental failure, but as the man says, sometimes when you lose, you win. (And a special memo to Mr Bass: sometimes when you talk, you defecate.)

**A**s an attempt to visualize the plains of heaven from a distinctly southern-CA vantage, the visual and conceptual daring of *What Dreams* finds a murky mirror in the plodding familiarity and old-tech moviemaking of *Star Trek: Insurrection*. The wider world has been unaccountably tolerant of this feeblest of Trek movies yet; but to anyone who cares about what the *Star Trek* mythos has meant for sf, *Insurrection* seems like a dispiriting betrayal, especially on the heels of the mostly-admirable *First Contact*. Earlier Trek films have been routinely camp, pompous, and/or daft, but at least they've all tried to live up to their responsibilities as the dominant mythology of the future, the first universal church of the time to come. The bottom line on Trek is that, love or loathe, it's educated the world in sf ways of thinking like nothing before it or since; and if its invitation to embrace a universe unbounded by our own space, time and species is rooted in a peculiarly 1960s, westcoast, televisual version of utopian liberalism, that's not by any means the worst emissary the genre could have dispatched to represent its sensibility to the outside world.

But *Insurrection* is poor stuff by any applicable standards. Part of the challenge for any *Star Trek* movie is that the narrative ground-rules were originally optimized for 1965 one-hour television series format and budget, and sooner or later it all comes back to a lot of people sitting on chairs in a studio interior and all leaning sideways at once, while someone looks at a dial and says "The metaphasic radiation from the rings is in a state of extreme flux! If we fire tachyon bursts it may cause him to reset his shield harmonics!" and the guy in the biggest chair barks out an instruction including the phrases "jettison the core" and "transfer control to manual," and then they all lean the other way. There's an awful lot of this stuff in *Insurrection*, and not very much of anything else. Such opened-out action as we get is all studiously gamelike and non-lethal, consisting mostly of having to shoot out flying transporter bots and dodge as long as possible the rays that will beam you up to the next level. Characters fare little better: *TNG* always laboured under a dazzlingly charis-

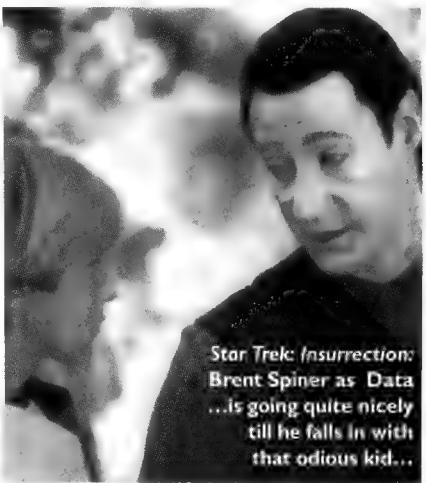
matic lead surrounded by uniformly duff supporting characters, and *Insurrection* scores no better than 1 out of 6 in its attempt to give the surrounding stalwarts something to do. Data is going quite nicely till he falls in with that odious kid; and while it's quite engaging to see Mr Riker, back in the director's chair, defoliate his chin and attempt the world's eeriest William Shatner impersonation, as usual the attempts to find gainful employment for Worf, Troi, Crusher and Geordi (evidently putting his foot down over having to act ever again in that bloody eyepiece) are watch-glancing at best and at worst just gruesome. Without a spacious series continuity to slot into, these just aren't characters who cut it on the big screen.

Thematically, *Insurrection* aims lower than any of its predecessors, and still shoots wide. Supposedly, it's a Prime Directive fable about the rights of indigenous peoples to opt out of the colonial project, however desirable to outsiders may be the natural resources on which they happen to have built their utopian health spa. That the resources here are nothing less than the elixir of youth itself, and that the Ba'ku settlement resembles nothing so much as a premium-rate new-age healing resort for resting daytime TV actors, is all simply part of the cheerfully westcoast spin on what heaven would ideally look like. What's less easy to overlook is the ideological circle-squaring on the subjects of technology, big government and self-determination. By a

strained twist, the Federation is deterred from bulldozing the home-world and dumping the natives in a reservation because the savages turn out to be qualified for paid-up membership. The Oregon-rustic Ba'ku, it turns out, "have" warp drive, but choose not to use it, presumably in the way that the great powers "have" nuclear capability – as if it's possible to retain advanced technology while obliterating all trace of it so completely from your society that the younger generation doesn't even possess a basic science education.

Well, maybe this is all possible in a metaphasic field whose side-effects include reversal of ageing, all-natural boob-firming and facelifts (contrast the *Brazil*-quoting surgical alternative enjoyed by the renegade So'na), and the opportunity for the veteran cast to act like it's 1987 again. But this is precisely the crunch for *Star Trek*'s own future. *Insurrection* raises, only to jettison, the unthinkable thought that the Federation itself – code, as in earlier movies, for the *Star Trek* franchise – may be on its last legs. "The Federation is old," says So'na leader F. Murray Abraham. "In the past 24 months, it has been challenged by every rival power in the galaxy." In this, of course, F. Murray is absolutely right. If the elderly enterprise is to survive to a third generation, it needs some radical rejuvenation; but there's no sign in *Insurrection* of any will to innovate. There's a potentially wonderful Dickensian moment in the finale where it's revealed that the last five minutes of the movie have been a holodeck simulation – prompting one to think how much more could be done with that most under-realized of plot resources, and how much more interesting a film it would have made. But what we get is a lot of overpaced beaming between sets ahead of a great big explosion whose shockwave, in common with the usual laws of movie physics, can be outrun by Picard climbing very fast up a ladder. No wonder that metaphasic Viagra is prescription-only.

**F**inally and briskly, the one religious sf movie of the season to seek no compromise whatever with Hollywood values. Darren Aronofsky's weirdo brain-movie *Pi* has been much compared with *Cube*, a film with which it has nothing whatever in common beyond a very, very low budget and a cosmetic smattering of pop mathematics. But there's quite a lot to enjoy in this silly tale of an intrograde maths prodigy cracking up under the combined assault of mental illness, migraines, pharmaceutical side-effects, qabbala-botherers, stock-market mafiosi, and the obsessive belief that his research is converging



*Star Trek: Insurrection:*  
Brent Spiner as Data  
...is going quite nicely  
till he falls in with  
that odious kid...

on the secret name of God. Certainly there's no denying *Pi*'s virtuosity as a piece of film-making, flashily, if tiredly, shot in the grainy, speedy b&w school of *Tetsuo*. ("Can we make the camerawork more nervy? No, more, more!") But the story is purest tosh, compounded by the affectation that it's in any sense a film about real ideas. In particular, it does its ostensible subject matter of the mathematical mind no favours at all, in pandering to a notion of what maths is that seems wilfully to embrace all the misconceptions it purports to deprecate. "When you throw away scientific reason," says the hero's mentor, "you cease to be a mathematician. You become a numerologist." Fine words; but there's little sense in *Pi* of mathematics as a process and method rather than a parade of gosh-wow objects (golden spirals, Fibonacci series) apparently culled from books with titles like *Math is Way Cool! No, Really!* On the contrary, what mathematicians do is fill their rooms with unaffordable gear to look for "patterns," and use their superior mental powers to stare at the Nasdaq listing till they see mystic correlations with priceless commercial value, and hard-looking women in suits pass them bootlegged military chips in metal briefcases.

The transcendental title has almost nothing to do with the actual movie, though oddly the idea of finding the creator's signature deep in the decimal places of pi did form the climax of Carl Sagan's original *Contact*. But that, as we know, was some flaky scientist's idea, swiftly purged from the movie version in favour of something considerably more metaphysically-correct. As the heavenly guru reassures film audiences in *What Dreams May Come*, "Your brain is a body part, like your fingernails. If you had your arm chopped off, you'd still be you." Right on! Now that's the voice of reason. High time that overrated organ was shown its place. Where's that powerdrill?

Nick Lowe



*Star Trek: Insurrection:*  
LeVar Burton as Geordi  
...evidently putting his  
foot down over having  
to act ever again in  
that bloody eyepiece...

# VALOUR!

*Chris Beckett*

**H**ere comes Vincent. Here he comes through the stratosphere on the Lufthansa shuttle: a shy, thin young Englishman, half-listening to the recorded safety instructions.

"Drinks, anyone? Drinks?" says the hostess: blonde, with high heels, makeup and a short, tight dress. Vincent reminds himself, with a certain eerie jolt, that she isn't human. She's a *synthetik* – a robot clothed in living tissue. Lufthansa use them on all their flights now. So do Air France and Alitalia. They are cheaper than real women, they do not require time off, and they are uniformly beautiful...

"Disconcerting, isn't it?" says the passenger next to him, an elderly German with a humorous mouth and extraordinarily mobile eyebrows. "You find yourself admiring them without really thinking about it – and then suddenly you remember they are only machines."

Vincent smiles just enough to avoid impoliteness. He does not enjoy chatting to strangers. Unfortunately his companion does not feel the same.

"My name is Gruber," says the elderly German, extending a large friendly hand. "Heinrich Gruber, I am a student of philosophy and philology. How about you?"

"I'm a computer scientist."

"Really? Where?"

"Cambridge usually, but I'm taking a sabbatical in Berlin."

Gruber chuckles. "Cambridge! Cambridge! The silicon city, the city of the disembodied mind!"

And as if to disassociate himself from any charge of being disembodied, he cranes round to stare at the comely bottom of the robot hostess as she stoops to take a bottle out of her trolley. He turns back to Vincent, eyebrows wriggling with amusement:

"And yet if she was a *real* human hostess and you and

I were sitting here quietly eyeing her up the way men do, would the position really be so different? It would not be her *soul* after all that was on our minds?" The eyebrows arch up triumphantly. Vincent colours slightly.

"Soul? I see you are a dualist," says Vincent, with a little laugh, so as to move the subject onto less personal ground.

Gruber frowns. "Dualist? My dear fellow, I study the philosophy of the Cassiopeians. I am a *trialist* through and through!"

Vincent smiles politely, looks at his watch, opens his lap-top and starts to tap keys so as to discourage Gruber from carrying on the conversation. Conversation is such hard work. It involves having to be someone.

"Your wife?" asks Gruber, nodding at the small picture sellotaped in the corner of the computer's keyboard.

"My girlfriend," says Vincent, for some reason blushing as he glances at the image of Lizzie. "She's a computer scientist too, back in Cambridge."

Gruber smiles his amiable, knowing smile. He takes out a battered paperback and reads, glancing across from time to time at the young Englishman whose hands dart so quickly over the keyboard and whose eyes shine as he studies the rich, multicoloured patterns on his screen.

Darkness starts to fall outside. Stars appear: Orion, Taurus. An evening meal is served by the pretty robots.

"They make their flesh from genetically modified shellfish tissue, I believe," says Gruber loudly, swivelling stiffly round in his seat to look at the hostess, "*Patella Aspera*, the common limpet. It's good at sticking on to things!"

Vincent smiles politely, cutting into his pork chop. *Synthetiks* first emerged from the laboratory a couple of years previously, and they are still banned in England-Wales, though the ban is currently being challenged in

the European Court. As a computer scientist he rather scorns the publicity given to the semi-human, semi-molluscan flesh. Simulated human tissue is *yesterday's* technology. The *real* technical achievement about synthetiks is the brilliant cybernetics which allow them to faithfully mimic the movements of the human body and face.

But perhaps you have to be a computer man to understand just how very clever that is.

"You English are wise to ban them of course," mutters the German philosopher, turning back to attend to his food. "What I said earlier was true but completely beside the point. The attraction between real human beings may well begin as a physical matter, but that is the mere starting point, the foundation on which the whole magnificent edifice of sexual love is built. But a synthetik is a starting point for nothing, the foundation of nothing."

Vincent doesn't like conversation – with strangers. But, seeing that conversation of some sort seems inevitable, he changes the subject.

"You were saying you have made a study of the Cassiopeians," he says. "I must admit I don't know much about them. I rather lost track after the news first broke, and those wonderful pictures came out. Tell me about *trialism*."

"You don't know much about them?! How can any educated..." Gruber makes a gesture of exasperation. "Well, I suppose I can't accuse you of being unusual in that respect! But it never ceases to amaze me that five years after the most astounding event in human history hardly anyone seems to give it a moment's thought. Would you believe, the research money for textual analysis is actually drying up now, though the message is still coming through clear as ever from the sky!"

Vincent feels a little ashamed. "Well, I suppose it is rather appalling when you put it like that! I guess it was when we all realized that the source was 200 lightyears away and there was no possibility at all of a dialogue or physical contact. And then it came out that it was all rather obscure philosophical ramblings and nothing that we could really use... I suppose it just became another one of those amazing things that we get used to: like cities on the moon or... or robot air hostesses with human flesh!"

The German snorts. "No doubt. But really is there any comparison between these little technological tricks that you mention and this: the discovery of other thinking minds among the stars?"

He rolls his eyes upward. "But then, no one is interested in *thinking* any more. You are quite right: when governments and corporations discovered that it was philosophy the Cassiopeians were sending out, that really was the last straw. They'd hoped for new technologies, new sciences, new powers over the physical world... But *philosophy*!"

He sighs extravagantly. "In answer to your question about trialism. The Cassiopeians organize the world in threes. They have three sexes, three states of matter, three dimensions of space, three modes of being... and above all, three great forces, struggling for dominance in the world: Valour, Gentleness and Evil."

"Not Good and Evil?"

"No, no, no. They have no concept of 'Good.' It would

seem quite incomprehensible to them that we could compound two such obviously unmixable essences as Valour and Gentleness into a single word. To the Cassiopeians, all three forces are equally incompatible. Gentleness tells us to do one thing, Evil tells us to do another, and Valour – it tells us to do another thing again."

Vincent smiles, with dry, polite scepticism. "I hadn't realized that the translation had got to this stage. I thought I read somewhere there was still a lot of controversy about the text."

The German growls darkly: "Ja, ja, ja, a lot of controversy..."

As they separate in the airport, Gruber presses a card into Vincent's hand. "Come and see me while you are in the city if you have the time. It is not every day after all that you will meet a naturalized Cassiopeian!"

His eyebrows bristle as he glares around at silvery robot security guards, robot porters, male and female synthetiks with bright smiles manning the airline check-in desks. "Even a genuine human being is becoming something of a rarity!"

Vincent says something insincere, but he is no longer paying attention to the peculiar old man. He has spotted his German friends, Franz and Renate.

"Vincent, how nice to see you! How are you? How is Lizzie? How is Cambridge?"

They are bright, polite, smartly dressed young people, who Vincent and Lizzie met when they spent a year in Cambridge. After the eccentric Gruber, who might at any time say something embarrassing, they seem very normal and unthreatening and easy to get along with. Vincent shakes their hands and exchanges minor news. They take him out to their little electric car (fossil fuels are *verboten* in the new Green Berlin) and head off in the direction of their Schoneberg apartment where he is to stay till he has found accommodation of his own.

"But I've forgotten if you've ever been here before?" says Franz.

"Strangely enough no. Very provincial of me, I know, not to have visited the capital of Europa!"

The two Germans laugh, pleased.

"Come now Vincent," says Renate, "surely even an Englishman knows that the capital of Europa is Brussels!"

"Well you know what they say: the President of the Commission sits in Brussels but when he puts in a claim for expenses it's Chancellor Kommler who signs the form."

The Germans smile. These bantering exchanges, with their little hidden barbs of jealousy, are the bread-and-butter of contacts between young Euro-professionals all over the continent, as they gradually shake down into a single, transnational class.

"Well," says Franz, "how about a little tour of this city of ours before we head for home?"

They drive through bright modern streets: tidy shops, tidy parks, tastefully restored old buildings, advertisement hoardings promoting healthy living and the avoidance of domestic accidents... (Not so different from Cambridge really, or Milton Keynes, or the modernized parts of London or Brussels, except more so.)

They drive past the Brandenburg Gate and the Reich-

stag. They go down the Kurfürstendamm. Franz points out the Volkskammer and the TV Tower from the gloomy days of the GDR. They drive along the boundary fence of Lichtenberg II, reputedly the largest Underclass estate in Europa, looking across with a small *frisson* (rather as an earlier generation might have looked across the famous Wall) at the monolithic apartment blocks within, where live the *gastarbeiter*, the unemployed, the outcasts of Europa's prosperous new order.

(“KILL MEDITERRANEAN SCUM,” hisses a scrawl on a hoarding. Somewhere inside there an Albanian boy is probably being kicked senseless by Nordic lumpenproles, or a Turkish girl being gang-raped...)

“Of this we are *not* proud,” says Renate.

Then all three of them, almost simultaneously, sigh and say: “But it seems this is the price of stability.”

“Ja, and we shouldn't forget that the Lichtenbergers have a guaranteed income, healthcare, roofs over their heads,” says Franz as he turns the car away from the gloomy perimeter, back into the bright prosperity of the *real* Berlin. “It's more than you can say for the poor in most of the world.”

He shrugs resignedly, defensively, and changes the subject to more cheerful things. “Now Vincent, I seem to recall you have a weakness for VR, I must show you the *Phantasmium*. It is the Mecca for all the VR *aficionados* in the city.”

“Sounds good!” Vincent laughs. He loves VR arcades. They make him feel 17 again. They give him a sense of wildness and dangerousness which is otherwise almost entirely lacking from his anxious, orderly life.

He and Franz plunge into the glowing electronic cave of the *Phantasmium*, with the agreeable, conspiratorial feeling that men have when they get together without their women. (Renate has declined to come in, and headed off on another errand. Like Lizzie, she hates VR.)

Of course, they have VR in Cambridge too (they also have Underclass estates), but the *Phantasmium* is on a wholly different scale. Vincent gives a small, impressed whistle. In an enormous dark chamber, long rows of cages made of plastic tubing stretch into the distance. And in nearly every cage, a youth squirms and writhes alone inside a suspended control suit that encloses his arms, legs and face, while he battles in imaginary landscapes against cybernetic phantoms that he alone can see and touch...

Other youths wander up and down the rows, sometimes peering into small monitoring screens that give a taste of the electronic dreams and nightmares on offer: “The South Invades,” “Berserkers of Islam,” “Gene-Lab Catastrophe,” “Pump-Action Killer,” “UC Break-out!”...

“Now that last one is good,” says Franz. “The subject matter is in poor taste I admit, but the graphics and tactuals are brilliant.”

Vincent smiles, runs his credit card over the reader and straps himself into the control suit. Soon he is cheerfully battling against a murderous gang of immigrants and benefit-claimants who have broken out of their concrete estate and are terrorizing the good citizens in the neighbouring suburbs.

(Every educated European knows that the Social Com-

promise is necessary to contain inflation, but how Europa is haunted by those outcasts behind their concrete walls!)

“Yeah,” he agrees, climbing out. “Pretty sophisticated stuff.”

At the end of this row of games an archway labelled “Liebespielen,” marks the beginning of an inner sanctum where the games are discreetly boxed in with plywood and have names like “Oral Heaven,” “Take Me, I'm Yours” and “Lust Unlimited.” The two young men, Franz and Vincent, glance through the gateway. Franz gives a hearty, worldly laugh, slightly forced.

Later, back in Franz and Renate's apartment, Vincent retires to his room and plugs in his lap-top so it can feed and replenish itself on the nourishing streams of information. Presently he calls up Lizzie.

“Oh it's you, Boo Boo dear.” (How did they start these silly names?) “Did you have a good flight?”

“Not bad at all.”

“What's their flat like?”

“Oh, like ours really, only bigger and more prosperous,” he laughs. “Come to think of it, that sums up the difference between Germany and England pretty well: like us really, only bigger and more prosperous!”

“I've got things sorted for me to come over. Should be there in three or four weeks.”

“Great.”

“You don't sound very pleased, Boo Boo!”

For a moment, Vincent looks at the face of his beloved and thinks: *No, I'm not. What do we really share in life except a dull little flat and an interest in computers...?*

He retreats in panic from this flash of terrifying clarity. “Of course I'm pleased, Liz-Liz. It's going to seem really strange just being on my own.”

“Hmmm,” says Lizzie, “I think perhaps I should let you stew on your own for a week or two, Boo Boo, and see how you like it!”

Afterwards, he can't sleep. He switches on his lap-top again and tunes in to a news satellite.

Every playground in Europa, it seems, is to be resurfaced in a new rubberized substance called Childsafe, following a tragic accident in Prague when a child fell from a swing...

New standards for food hygiene are to be announced by the Commissioner for Health...

The sprawling and impoverished Federation of Central Asia is preparing once again for war with its neighbours. A vast crowd swirls round a giant statue of a soldier in heroic pose. The crowd chants. “Death! Death! Death!” “Death to the blasphemers! Death for the Motherland is glorious indeed!” Thousands of fists are thrust up in unison into the air. And the statue gouts real blood from a dozen gaping wounds...

(Vincent leans forward closer to the screen. All over Europa, with its safe children's playgrounds and its pure and hygienic food, healthy and well-fed people are leaning forward like him to watch this reckless energy, this crazy camaraderie with violence and misery and death...)

Every day, says the reporter, people queue in their thousands to donate blood for the statue. They are generally malnourished. They can ill afford to give away

their lifeblood, but they keep on coming anyway. Never mind that Central Asia's hospitals have no blood to give the sick and the injured, never mind that the needles are reused again and again and AIDS is rampant, the statue's wounds must flow.

Crazy! Tragic! Obscene!

But look at the triumph in those faces, the ecstasy, the passion!

Vincent switches off and goes to a window. Faint smudges of stars are visible in the city sky, He tries to remember which one of those constellations is Cassiopeia.

Franz and Renate are conscientious hosts. They take Vincent to the museums and the historic sites. They take him to concerts and parties. They take him one frosty night to the famous annual parade on the Unter den Linden.

The starry flag of Europa flies high over the crowds alongside the black and red and gold of the mighty German *Bund*. Statues and buildings loom eerily in the icy floodlights. And then, one after another under the flood-lights, they come, where so many parades have come before. But these are not brownshirts, not goosestepping soldiers of the GDR, not missiles and rocket launchers, not bands, not Olympic athletes or dignitaries... They are creatures from prehistory, great shaggy denizens of the Pleistocene steppes, shambling patiently one after another between the Doric columns of the Brandenburg Gate.

Mammoths!

Franz and Renate lean on the railings while the animals go by. They have seen the parade before. They watch the scene with a proprietorial air, from time to time looking round to check that their guest is suitably impressed.

Immense beasts! And they walk with such *assurance*, such calm, muscular gravity, as if their resurrection was not an incredible and improbable feat of science, but a simple law of nature: everything returns.

"Those huge tusks!" breathes Vincent.

"Berlin has 140 mammoths now," says Franz.

"New York has 12," says Renate. "Even Tokyo only has 60, and of course the Japanese have much freer access to the frozen carcasses in Siberia than we do because of the Eastern Pact."

Another huge male lumbers by, and Franz nods in its direction. "They have a few in Russia itself of course, but they are really rather a cheat. Less than 20 percent of the genes are actually authentic mammoth. They are really just Indian elephants with big tusks and added hair. The Berlin mammoths are 80 or 90 percent pure."

"Even the New York mammoths are only 70-percent genuine," says Renate, "and they are having considerable difficulty in successfully breeding from them for that reason..."

"Something to do with incompatible chromosomes I believe, And most of them have defective kidneys..."

But Vincent the quiet Englishman suddenly gives a strangled bellow of rage: "For God's sake can't you just shut up for a moment and *look* at the things!"

Franz and Renate gape at him in amazement, along with a whole segment of the crowd. Just as amazed as they are, but still boiling with anger, Vincent turns his back and walks away.

A little later a thought occurs to him, he takes the battered visiting card out of his pocket and heads for the Kreuzberg apartment of Dr Heinrich Gruber.

"Come in, my friend, come in!"

It is musty and dark, like a brown cave, full of wood and the smell of pipe smoke, and Vincent has the feeling that he is the first visitor for quite some time.

"Come on through!"

The old man's eyebrows bristle with pleasure and animation as he ushers Vincent into his small sitting room, and dives off into a grubby little kitchen to fetch beer. Vincent looks around, feeling uncomfortable and embarrassed and wondering why he came.

Half the floor-space is covered in books. (Is this man unaware that he can access the whole Library of Europa from a simple lap-top linked into the Net?) And there are jumbled piles of print-outs, covered with an unreadable gobbledegook of letters, numbers and punctuation marks.

XXQPeNU'BVFF6VVG'NNLPPP\*JJVNKL'LJGDSFE)  
XMX9\*MMML XVXVOG?KK'BKQQZ...

"This is Cassiopeian?" Vincent asks as Gruber returns with the beer.

"Ja, ja, that is the standard notation of Cassiopeian."

The elderly man rummages through a stack of files. "You probably remember that the message contains a repetitive element. Every 422 days it repeats the same five-day-long passage known as the Lexicon, which turns out to be a 'Teach Yourself' guide to the language. The key to understanding it was when we discovered that part of the Lexicon consisted of co-ordinates for a spatial grid. When these were mapped out, they produced pictures. The Cassiopeians taught us the basics of their language by sending us pictures and accompanying each picture with the appropriate word or words..."

He goes to a computer and taps on keys.

Suddenly a face stares out at Vincent, thin and long, utterly inscrutable, crowned with spiky horns...

"This one is a female," says Gruber, tapping another key. "This is a male. This belongs to the third sex, which I call *promale*. If you remember, the Cassiopeians have a triploid reproductive system, a simple biological fact which permeates the whole of their language, their culture, their metaphysics. They simply do not see the world in terms of black and white, yes or no, positive or negative. Everything is in mutually exclusive *threes*..."

He taps more keys and new images roll across the screen: plants and strange animals, buildings strung like spiders' webs between enormous diagonal struts...

"They are *incredible* pictures," says Vincent. "I've seen them before of course, but you're quite right, it's amazing how quickly we've all just forgotten them."

Gruber smiles. "The images are fascinating of course, but they are really only the key to the text..."

Vincent smiles. "Which is truly nothing but philosophy?"

He is dimly aware that this is where the controversy lies: the extent to which the text has really been translated or just guessed at.

After all, who would think of beaming philosophy out to the stars?

Gruber nods. "Even though they have made a powerful radio transmitter, the Cassiopeians are not especially sophisticated technologically. They simply don't put such a high store by science and technology as we do: they consider all that to be only one of three different and separate fields of knowledge."

Vincent asks what the other two are but Gruber is too preoccupied with his own train of thought to answer. He leaps to his feet with alarming agility for such an old man.

"The point about the Cassiopeians is that they are not afraid to *think*. They still trust themselves to do something more imaginative than *count!* As a result their ideas are beautiful and they know it, so they beam them out for anyone who wants to listen."

He laughs angrily. "Which on this planet at least, sometimes seems to be about eight people among all the seven billion inhabitants!"

He perches on a table, takes out his pipe and begins to fill it, but presently leaps up again, thrusting the still unlit pipe at the young Englishman.

"My dear friend, what the Cassiopeians offer us is something that we desperately need: *wisdom!* Our own ideas have grown stale. We are in a blind alley. Christianity was once a brilliant new liberating leap. So once was scientific rationalism. But they have grown old. We have no real ideas any more – not even us Germans, for whom ideas were once almost a *vice*. Especially not us Germans. All we have is the pursuit of cleverer and cleverer technologies – all quite pointless of course in the absence of any system of values that could tell us what all this cleverness is *for*."

He laughs and sits down again, wiping a speck of spit from his lower lip. "But as you can see this is something of an obsession with me. Have some more beer. It comes from my homeland of Swabia. Not bad, do you agree?"

Vincent smiles. The beer is indeed good, and very strong. He feels quite at ease. He finds himself liking the old man.

Gruber picks up a file and begins to read aloud: "Just as there are three sexes, three states of matter and three Modes of Being – Substance, Life and Soul – so there are three principles in the universe constantly at war: Gentleness, Valour and Evil. There can be no reconciliation between these three, no final resolution of their perpetual conflict, only temporary alliances. Those who hate Evil must surely hope for an alliance of Gentleness and Valour, full of contradictions though such an Alliance will inevitably be. But oftentimes in history it is Valour and Evil that come together against Gentleness and we see cruel, harsh and warlike nations, preoccupied with honour, indifferent to suffering."

He flips over the page: "At other times it is Gentleness and Evil that form an alliance against Valour. Nations become timid. They fear passion. They try to hide themselves away from the reality of suffering and death..."

"That sounds a bit like Europa!" observes Vincent, and the old scholar beams at him delightedly.

"Precisely, my friend, precisely. We are *obsessed* with the fruitless struggle to eliminate disease and accident and death. We cordon off all that is distressing and unruly in the Underclass Estates. We have our wars in

faraway countries, and watch them from the comfort and safety of our living rooms. We confine adventure to the Virtual Reality arcades, where no one ever gets hurt and nothing is ever achieved. We do not trouble one another any more with our untidy sexual passions, but release them (if we must) in the hygienic *liebespielen*, or in the new synthetik brothels, which everyone says are so 'civilized,' because they do not spread disease..."

When he has finally left the old man, Vincent spends some time wandering the busy Kreuzberg streets, reluctant to return to Franz and Renate's apartment. He feels embarrassed by his earlier outburst, embarrassed, now that it is over, by his evening with the old philosopher in his squalid little bachelor's lair.

He passes VR arcades, video galleries. He passes an establishment which he suddenly realizes with alarm is a *Puppehaus*, a state brothel staffed by specially adapted synthetiks. He walks quickly past.

Three police cars whoop by, heading Eastwards to put the lid back on some bubbling outbreak of violence and mayhem in Lichtenberg, or one of the other big UC estates.

*I'll stop for a drink and wait until Franz and Renate are in bed*, Vincent decides. *Sort it out in the morning.*

He turns into a street called Moritzstrasse.

("Empire of Charlemagne!" exclaims a poster put up by the Carolingian Party for the recent senatorial elections. They stand for a smaller unified Europa consisting of France, Germany, Lombardy, the Low Countries – the area of Charlemagne's long-dead empire. Tired old Europa is rummaging in the attic of her own history for ideas, but the ideas are stale and empty. No one votes for the Carolingians. Those who turn out for elections vote dutifully for Federation, the Market and the Social Compromise.)

He finds a small bar and orders a glass of red wine. There is a TV on in the corner showing an extended news programme about the anticipated bloodbath in Central Asia.

Vincent sips his wine and looks around the room. In the far corner a young man is fighting chimeras in a small head-and-hands VR machine. A fat red man at the bar is loudly extolling the virtues of a one-and-a-half percent reduction in interest rates, currently the hot issue in Europa's political life.

At the next table, a woman about Vincent's own age is sitting by herself. She is very beautiful, with a certain sad, unselfconscious grace. Vincent stares and unexpectedly she turns and sees him, meeting his eyes for a moment and giving him a small wistful smile.

Vincent looks away hastily, takes another sip from his glass.

But suddenly he is aware of the three warring principles of the Cassiopeians struggling for control within his mind.

"Go over to her!" says Valour.

"What about Lizzie?" says Gentleness.

"If it's sex you want," says Evil, "why not just go back to that *Puppehaus*?"

But "Go over!" says Valour, that new and unfamiliar voice.

Vincent is terrified. Never in his whole life has he ever done anything as audacious as to approach a beautiful stranger in a bar. He and Lizzie only went out together after months of working side by side. Even now, after four years together, their sexual life is crippled by fear...

"Go!" says Valour.

Grasping his wineglass firmly, Vincent stands up. He clears his throat. He tries to assemble in his mind a coherent opening sentence. (The entire German language seems to be rapidly deleting itself from his brain...)

"I... I..."

She smiles delightedly and Vincent grins back amazed, only to find that she isn't smiling at him at all...

"Clara! I'm sorry to be late!" says a big blond man behind him, crossing the room and exchanging a kiss with the beautiful woman.

The clenched wineglass shatters in Vincent's hand. He feels an excruciating stab of pain. Blood wells from a deep gash between his fingers.

Clara looks round. Everyone in the bar looks round — some amused, some puzzled, some afraid. This crazy figure clutching broken glass, what will he do next?

What can he do? Staring straight ahead of him, dripping blood, Vincent stalks out into the cold street. No one challenges him to pay his bill.

KILL ALL WOPS, says a scrawl on the wall opposite. EMPIRE OF CHARLEMAGNE, says another. KEEP BERLIN TIDY, says a municipal sign.

But, just over the rooftops, the bold W of Cassiopeia shines down from a starry sky.

From somewhere up there, fainter than gossamer, fainter than the silvery tenuous voices of the stars, whispers the Cassiopeian signal. It is a ripple from a single small pebble dispersing slowly across an enormous ocean, yet even at the far shore of the ocean it still bears the unmistakeable signature of its origin. It is still a message. It is still purposeful. It is still without question the product of intelligent minds.

"Valour?" says Vincent to those intelligent minds, nursing his copiously bleeding hand. "Valour is it? Do you realize you've just made me look a complete idiot?"

He chuckles a bit at this, then laughs out loud.

And then he crashes unconscious to the ground.

Clara and her blond brother Hans are the first to come to Vincent's aid. He is flat on his face on the cold Kreuzberg pavement, under the frosty stars.

"We need to do something about that hand," says Clara. "He's lost an awful lot of blood."

**Chris Beckett**, who is a former social worker living in Cambridge, is the author of seven previous stories in *Interzone*, the last of which was "The Warrior Half-and-Half" (issue 102). The above new story is set against the same general background as his earlier stories "La Macchina" (issue 46) and "The Welfare Man" (issue 74) — both of which were anthologized, the former in Gardner Dozois's *The Year's Best SF* and the latter in *The Best of Interzone*.

"Doesn't just make the hairs on the back of your neck stand on end — it rips them out with no prior warning" —THE TIMES

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**G**odfrey first tasted it at Arthur and Eve's party. This was a month before their store, The Big Cheese, was due to close for good.

Normally he would have done his tasting at The Big Cheese — he enjoyed the brisk walk from the house he still shared with his wife, and on quiet afternoons he and Eve could be alone together. But Eve had told him she planned to serve something unusual at the party, a little-known French specialty he wouldn't find in any store until the next shipment arrived. It would make a fascinating topic for his column in *High Living*, she'd assured him, and her supplier had promised to bring over a sample. That had been reason enough for Godfrey to go.

"We've carried every import you've ever written about," Arthur boasted as the festivities were getting into full swing. He led Godfrey through the crowded living room, shouldering his way to the tray on the coffee table. "What we've got here's in a different league, though. Eve's already hooked. Looks like she's in good company."

On the tray between the Havarti and the Emmenthal was a blue-veined cheese Godfrey didn't recognize. It had a funny shape, not the customary wheel or block but more like a large rump. Guests were clustered around it, including some of the foodservice-industry bigwigs Godfrey had interviewed for *High Living* and other glossy lifestyle magazines.

He surveyed the rest of the room, sipping his Beaujolais. There was no sign of Eve. As casually as he could manage, he asked her husband where she'd gone.

"She's working," Arthur said. "Catering job came in at the last minute." Maybe it was the wine, but his sour expression suggested they'd had one of their arguments, the heated kind that put even the best-kept secrets at risk.

*You're worrying too much,* Godfrey tried to convince himself. *If he knew about us he'd be a hell of a lot more upset.*

"How's Louise?" Arthur asked in return. "We hardly ever see her in the store any more. Don't tell me, didn't she come tonight?"

Godfrey thought wryly about how his wife's absence on an occasion like this would have bothered him in the happier days of his marriage, long before his fling with Eve. He snapped out of it when he saw a hand claim a wedge of the blue cheese. The hand belonged to Norman Kastner, an importer who was making a killing on overpriced *triple-crèmes* and raw-milk *chèvres*. Godfrey's profile of him had run in the same issue as the review of

The Big Cheese.

"She's still at the office," Godfrey answered at last. "She's getting a presentation ready for tomorrow. There's a promotion at stake. It means a lot to her."

"Reminds me of a comparison you made in your article about Norman Kastner," Arthur said. He glanced around, as if everybody else in the room reminded him of it, too.

"What was that?" Godfrey asked.

"The ambitions of the most successful people evolve like Kastner's cheeses," Arthur intoned. "They grow stronger with age."

Godfrey smiled distractedly. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Kastner eating from the tray, engaging between bites in conversation with another hungry-looking guest. He turned back to Arthur.

"Isn't that—"

"Elliot Hathaway," Arthur finished for him. He didn't have to explain that Hathaway was the developer whose condominiums were going up after the store was coming down; an article on the subject had come out in the last issue of *High Living*.

Hathaway, too, was feasting on the blue cheese. The veins in his bald head seemed to bulge as he chewed.

"He's Eve's biggest catering customer," Arthur went on. Was it the wine again, or had his expression soured some more?

Godfrey edged closer to the rump of cheese. Roughly five pounds of it were left on the tray. The rind was a natural light brown; its uniform colour and smooth surface made him think of Eve's tan. The interior was a pale yellow speckled with patches of dark greenish blue mould — *Penicillium glaucum* or *roqueforti*, in all likelihood. Secondary mould formations extended from the patches, branching out into thin lines that meandered and interconnected like tiny blood vessels. He speared a loose fragment with a toothpick and lifted it to his lips.

"What's it called?"

Arthur shrugged. "Nobody seems to know. Kastner tells me it's made by monks, like Port Salut used to be. His buyer got some from a monastery in the Pyrenees. Just a small wheel for personal use."

Godfrey closed his eyes, carefully sniffing, and picked up a powerful, lingering smell. In print he might have described it as a "rustic fragrance reminiscent of Limburger," a characteristic shared by many of his favourite imports. It was tempered by a mixture of more subtle aromas that were at once familiar and strange, ranging



Rudy Kremberg

from fresh and perfume-like to ancient and musty. The Limburger smell predominated, however. Already it was giving him a buzz, making his taste buds perk up in anticipation.

"Interesting smell," he murmured.

"Like someone's feet," a woman at the table blurted out. It was Nora Hawkes, a celebrated divorce lawyer whose drooping breasts reminded Godfrey of over-the-hill Brie that had gone runny. She was swaying drunkenly, holding a chunk of the blue cheese in one hand, a glass of wine in the other.

Slowly, Godfrey placed the cheese in his mouth and withdrew the toothpick. The texture, as his tongue moved around and his teeth came together, was firm to semisoft, not as crumbly as most blues. But that wasn't what was making his head spin.

It was the flavour. It was incredibly complex – it was a whole world of flavours, a gustatory melting pot that embodied the essence of every cheese he had ever tasted. It started with the rich cheddar piquancy of Stilton, which in turn was followed by the leaner winy tang of Roquefort, the succulent gaminess of Gorgonzola, then by hints of Blue Castello, Lymeswold, Fourme d'Ambert and a host of other blues. Next came the sumptuous mushroomy undertones of the finest Brie de Meaux and Normandy Camembert, the sweet nuttiness of Swiss Gruyère, the mellow creaminess of Canadian Oka, the fruity bite of Parmigiano-Reggiano, the bold earthiness of Danish Esrom and Alsatian Münster and... he lost track of what else.

But there was more to the flavour than an amalgamation of cheeses. Something that, like the smell, was strange and at the same time vaguely familiar.

"I think I could make it a best-seller," proclaimed Larry Horowitz, the owner of the ad agency whose two-page spreads in *High Living* extolled the elegance of Hathaway's condominiums.

"Where can I get a few pounds of this stuff?" Nora Hawkes wanted to know.

This last question echoed around the room.

"I'm afraid what you see here is what you get," Arthur broke in. "The good news is, there should be more available soon. For now, everybody please help yourself. By all means, take some home."

Godfrey watched in mute astonishment as guests suddenly converged on what remained of the cheese, elbowing each other out of the way. People who had six-figure incomes, who hired grocery services to do their shopping, who in recent years had never packed so much as a cheese sandwich, began breaking sections off, wrapping them in napkins or in the wax paper Arthur had stacked beside the tray.

*I'm not a part of this,* Godfrey told himself. *They're all drunk or stoned or crazy.*

Something else seemed odd: if Kastner had given Arthur only a small wheel of the cheese, where had the huge piece on the coffee table come from? And if it was as rare as Eve had made out, how likely was it that there would be "more available soon"?

He was finding it hard to think straight, what with the wine going to his head and all the pushing and shouting

going on. He was more than a little hungry, too, and getting hungrier by the second. So hungry that he was beginning to gravitate toward the cheese. What the hell, he rationalized, he might as well take some of it home, see if he couldn't come up with a coherent flavour description. Then finish his column by the deadline.

Even before this decision had gelled, he was reaching for the tray.

"Something's on your mind," Louise told him that night.

He shifted his head on the pillow and looked at her guiltily. The guilt turned into anger.

*So what if you're right,* he was tempted to say. *So what if it's Eve who's on my mind. Look what's been on your mind.*

His anger faded when he realized that this time it wasn't Eve he'd been thinking of. The anger promptly reasserted itself when he wondered, as he'd fallen into the habit of doing lately, what Louise really had been working on at the office. He didn't know what was worse: a wife who was in love with another man, or one who was in love with her career.

His stomach made a noise.

"I'm hungry," he said, getting out of bed. "That's what's on my mind."

"I wish we could both be hungry for the same thing at the same time," she said. "Sometimes I get the feeling we don't have anything in common any more."

He was already in the kitchen by then, drawn to the fridge by the same relentless hunger that had taken hold of him at the party. Only now the hunger was even stronger.

He took the cheese from a remote corner of the vegetable compartment. He liked to think it was for Louise's own good that he'd hidden it there. She had a habit of overeating to relieve the pressures of her job, and she herself acknowledged that she was getting fat as a result. Anyway, there was less than a quarter of a pound left. He must have devoured the rest on the way home. Or had that been later? He couldn't be certain. His memory tended to suffer when he was this hungry.

After wolfing down the last few morsels, he returned to bed and found Louise whispering to herself.

"What's that smell?" she said, looking up. She'd been praying, he gathered. It was a ritual she always went through the night before an important presentation. Another way of coping with the pressures of her job – of keeping things in perspective, to use her phrase.

He grunted and rolled over. He didn't waste his breath telling her the cause of the smell; she would assume it was Limburger and not care if it wasn't. He fell asleep thinking about Eve, about how he had so much more in common with her than with his wife of seven years.

Then he dreamed of eating more cheese.

Walking up to the store the following afternoon, he noted with satisfaction that the neighbourhood – "potentially upscale," he'd labelled it in the review – was evolving the way he'd predicted it would.

The family-owned bakery across the street had been

transformed into a cafe that served almond croissants and decaffeinated espresso and was twice as expensive. The used-car lot at the corner had become an Alfa Romeo dealership. The local YMCA had turned into a racquet club catering to doctors, lawyers and corporate executives.

Eve had wanted to rename the store to give it a more "sophisticated" image, she'd told Godfrey at one point. But Arthur had insisted The Big Cheese was perfect. That was what most of their customers wanted to be, she'd quoted him as saying with a straight face.

And now Elliot Hathaway was going to build his luxury condominiums.

Along with the launderette next door and the abandoned church on the other side, the store had been slated for demolition to make room for the development. Godfrey remembered how shocked Arthur had been when he'd received official word of the re-zoning – a far cry from Eve's reaction. Chances were, Hathaway himself had broken the news to her in advance.

Godfrey's stomach rumbled. Again, he felt the pull of that voracious hunger. The hunger was almost enough to make him forget about the deadline for his column. And his disappointment at being greeted by Arthur instead of Eve inside the store.

"Your timing couldn't be better," Arthur said cheerfully. "I just got a shipment of that interesting blue you had last night. Can I cut you a pound?"

"Make it two. How much—"

Arthur held up his hand. "Don't worry about it."

He disappeared down a flight of stairs behind the counter. Godfrey waited restlessly, wishing Eve were around. She was busy with another catering job, he guessed. Perhaps she was doing a little personal catering with Elliot Hathaway – he wouldn't put it past her. In any case, he could understand why she'd be eager to get away from the store. Hadn't she confided to him that she'd started the catering service because she was hungry for a change, that she had married Arthur in the hope he would expand the business or sell it and devote himself to something more profitable, something more ambitious?

Arthur emerged from the cellar, muttering to himself about the shortage of storage space in the main cooler. He wrapped the cheese in a triple layer of wax paper to contain the pungent smell.

"I was thinking of doing a write-up," Godfrey said, taking out his notepad. "You mentioned the cheese is from a monastery in the Pyrenees."

Arthur nodded. "The monks have been making it since the Middle Ages. Some obscure order I never heard of before."

He spelled out the name, and Godfrey jotted it down.

"They invented it?"

Arthur shook his head. "They claim it was around at the time of Christ. Actually, it's got quite a history. You wouldn't believe some of the local legends."

"Try me," Godfrey said. It didn't much matter what he believed; what mattered was that he came up with a catchy lead. Like the story about aged Edam being used as cannonballs, or the one about Casanova claiming Roquefort was an aphrodisiac.

Arthur broke into a grin. "Kastner says he heard the

cheese might have been on the table at the Last Supper. In fact, according to one rumour, it wasn't bread that Jesus consecrated with the wine – it was the cheese. Apparently that's why some of the locals are superstitious about it. They say you shouldn't eat it if your soul isn't pure."

Godfrey listened in sceptical silence and grinned back.

"Seriously, how did it end up in Europe?"

"Kastner asked his buyer the same thing, but his contact at the monastery didn't seem to know. All he'd say was that it's made by a secret process. Nothing unique about that."

"I don't get it," Godfrey said. "If the cheese is so good and it's been around for so long, why did the monks keep it to themselves until now? Why didn't they do what the Trappists did with Port Salut? That is, sell it?"

Arthur hesitated.

"They did," he finally answered. "Sometime in the ninth century, soon after the monastery was built. At least, one of them sold it."

"Only one?"

"Well, an *ex-monk*. He was supposed to be a master cheesemaker. Also an all-round gourmet, like a lot of monks in those days. Legend has it he either quit the monastery or got kicked out. Lost his faith and his celibacy, or so the story goes. Ended up becoming a glutton. A rich one, too. He went into business with a local dairy farmer, and they made a bundle selling this cheese. Then they both dropped out of sight. Nobody ever found out what happened to them, and presumably nobody's tried to sell the cheese since then. *That's all I know.*"

Godfrey thanked him for the free cheese and went back to his office, a dozen questions still nagging him.

*That's all I know.*

The words had a false ring to them, it struck him as he read his notes before starting on the column.

His stomach rumbled again.

He groped around in the shopping bag Arthur had given him, came up with a sliver of cheese barely big enough to satisfy a mouse. He stared at it, baffled, until he remembered he'd already eaten most of the two pounds.

That night, the rumbling was louder than ever.

"I'm not feeling myself," he said to Louise. "I'm always hungry."

He sat down on the edge of the bed, making no move to take off his street clothes. His whole body felt brittle and sore, as if any attempt at lovemaking might cause it to break into pieces.

"Didn't you just have a snack?" she asked.

No response. She caressed his shoulder.

"You didn't ask me how the presentation went."

"I'm hungry," he moaned. "That's all I can think about."

She pulled him toward her, then recoiled.

"That smell again," she said. "If you have to eat stinky cheese, I wish you'd do it outside the house."

He watched her probing, plaintive eyes, the same eyes that had once made all differences between him and her seem insignificant, and he remembered the hunger she used to arouse in him. He remembered how, over the

years, that hunger had been overshadowed by other kinds of hunger. Hunger for his own food column in *High Living*, for a penthouse condo, for a BMW with a cellular phone.

The funny part was, instead of satisfying him, the acquisition of those things had only fuelled his hunger for more of the same: the managing editor's job, a house with a tennis court, a Porsche.

And lately, from the moment he had first walked into The Big Cheese in search of material for the column, there had been his hunger for Eve.

But there was something special about his hunger for Arthur's mysterious blue cheese, something more basic and deeply rooted, something much more compelling, than all of the other things put together.

"Godfrey," his wife was saying. "Talk to me."

He got to his feet.

"Go back to sleep. I'm tired of talking."

Before she could question that, before he could question it, he found himself back in the kitchen, drawn to the fridge again by the hunger that had been gnawing at him since the party. His mouth was watering. He swung the fridge door open.

The cheese was gone.

As he tried to reconstruct how and when he'd finished it off, the hunger was forcing him to put on his coat. Then it was forcing him out the door, onto the street. His appetite was growing by leaps and bounds now. He tried to make himself turn back, tried to believe that nobody could be this hungry, that nothing could be this addictive, that he was still his own master, but he'd already passed the point of no return and he knew it. He walked away briskly into the night, leaving his seven years of marriage behind, and didn't stop until he reached the store. The sight of the abandoned church beside it diverted his thoughts to Arthur's story about the monk who had lost his faith... and the monk's disappearance.

A sickening realization dawned on him. A second later a fresh wave of hunger washed it away.

The store's front door was unlocked, but by the time he stepped over the threshold he was too hungry to wonder why. The hunger pulled him inside, across the deserted floor, behind the counter and down the stairs to the big cooler in the cellar, and waiting for him there were oddly shaped fragments of blue cheese. He opened the cooler, only dimly aware of the potent smell, mesmerized by what he saw. Some of the shapes were strikingly familiar, not unlike the crown of Elliot Hathaway's hairless head, or Nora Hawkes' drooping breasts...

He started to eat.

The last thing he was conscious of, just before his body went numb and his jaws ground to a halt, was that his veins were turning a dark greenish blue.

"I got the promotion," Louise was telling Arthur at the next party, the one marking the opening of the new store. "But now that Godfrey's gone it doesn't seem like a big deal. I wish I could share the news with him."

"The police haven't found any trace of him yet?" her host asked, holding out his plate. She helped herself to a wedge of Camembert.

"They're looking into the possibility of foul play," she said. She swallowed the Camembert, washed it down with a mouthful of wine. She'd been eating and drinking more than she should have, and her head was starting to feel light. "I'm convinced he was meeting another woman that night."

"You'll get over him," Arthur said. "Give it some time and you'll see things in perspective. That's how I got over Eve."

She took the last piece off Arthur's plate. A blue cheese.

"You know, if it wasn't for all those other disappearances, I might suspect he ran off with her. I used to wonder if there was something going on between them. They seemed to have a lot in common, don't you agree?"

If Arthur was surprised or perturbed to hear this, he didn't show it. He studied the empty plate, smiled enigmatically.

"Well, he did share her taste in cheese."

"Smells like someone's feet," Louise said, wrinkling her nose at the piece she was holding.

A greenish blue vein seemed to bleed where the toothpick went in, but neither that nor the smell stopped her from taking a bite. And when she did, a vast and insatiable hunger overcame her, a hunger accompanied by a curious sense of affinity, a feeling that the blood of all humanity was flowing through her body. Then the feeling was gone.

"I know," Arthur said. "I like to think it's the feet of God."

She looked at him, puzzled, not sure if it was the wine or the cheese that was making her giddy. Better not to talk too much, she decided.

She pulled herself together. Other guests were congregating by the tray on the coffee table, eating noisily. They were the kind of people Godfrey's magazine profiled, she noticed. People who had reached pinnacles of success that she was only beginning to strive for. Funny how, in spite of the prosperity they exuded, they were all stuffing themselves, looking and sounding starved.

Arthur gestured toward the tray, asked if she wanted more. She wavered.

"I really ought to curb my appetite," she said. She patted the flab around her waist. "At least until I'm in better shape."

He smiled again, and for a moment she thought the smile was one of relief. She followed his gaze back to the tray, debating whether to have another piece after all. But by then it would have been impossible to break through the crowd.

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# Freckled figure

*Hiroe Suga*

The four figurines were delivered to Kondo's room in the student boarding house. When Kondo saw the package had come from the Hishitomo Daglian Saga Character Contest, he ripped it open immediately.

Illuminated by the late afternoon sun, Kondo and Yamashita fell on the contents, the fragmented figurines, talking excitedly, exploring.

Yasuko Miyata watched and listened, amused, baffled. Of course the prize was partly hers too. But she couldn't understand a word the boys were saying.

Yamashita pinched Princess Colleen's torso. "This stuff is pretty hard. They said it's a polymer, but it feels more like resin to me. And it has no joints. How's it supposed to move without any joints?"

Kondo – plump, delicate, cerebral – arranged the parts of the dragon. It looked like a dead lizard, dismembered. "It could almost be injection plastic. Oh, this overhang is perfect... Look. The upper and lower torso separate at the waist. That's how you remodel it."

"Yes, but there isn't any putty on the market for porous flexible polymers, at least not yet. Besides, aren't these figures supposed to be self-animating? No stop-go, none of that hassle with spacers and filling in cracks..."

Kondo frowned. "Look at this. You have to hand-paint the eyes. Why not seals or decals?..." He glanced sharply at Yamashita. "Damn it! I told you not to touch them when you've been eating potato crisps!"

Yamashita gaped at him in mock horror. "Oh, sheesh. The princess is covered in oil. I suppose I'll just have to assemble her, won't I?"

"You planned it that way –"

"Oh, come on, Kondo."

Kondo gazed longingly at Colleen, beautiful star of the

Saga, in Yamashita's hands. "So I get to make the dragon. As usual. Actually these wing and breast parts should be interesting..."

They talked on, exploring, joshing, visibly thrilled.

Yasuko thought they had come a long way since they saw the ad for the contest, run in the black-and-white pages at the back of a hobby magazine. And she certainly hadn't expected them to take first prize.

But maybe it had been team work. Kondo could draw machinery and monsters, but was hopeless with human figures, while Yamashita was fatally sloppy. So in the end, while she left the detailed design of the dragon to Kondo, all the work on the main characters – Prince Galba, Princess Colleen and Aerda, the village girl with the freckles – was Yasuko's alone.

And now, she thought, it was becoming real.

The Daglian Saga Character Contest had been the brainchild of Hishitomo Institute, an electronics parts manufacturer, along with Shinshu Chemical, a manufacturer of raw materials for kits and models, and Dux, a visual media company. All the applicants were sent the script of a new Daglian Saga scenario, and – the ad promised – Dux would make an animated film of the story using figures based on the winning character designs. Shinshu and Hishitomo would market tie-in kits. The prize-winners would get to assemble the figures themselves.

And the movie – made with these very figures – would be unlike any ever seen before.

"So," said Kondo, "what else? Who assembles Prince Galba and um, what's she called? The village girl with the freckles?"

"Aerda," said Yasuko.

Yamashita, clutching Colleen by her long legs, smiled at Yasuko.

Yasuko returned his look, and laughed. "You're joking." Kondo was confused; he looked from one to the other. "What am I missing?"

"Look," said Yasuko. "I know I can paint and I can do calligraphy. But I've never made a model in my life!"

"Not 'models,'" said Yamashita. "These are 'kits'. Or 'figures'."

Kondo traced the fine edge work on the dragon's wing. "Actually, Yasuko, you shouldn't have any trouble. At least, no more than the rest of us. I know they said it'd be like making a resin garage kit, but this is the first time that any of us have worked with this porous flexible polymer stuff. Look, they've even included special paint and putty. You can do it, Yasuko."

"Come on, Yasuko," Yamashita said. "It will be fun." He rummaged through the box beside him. He handed Yasuko a kit, resting on a sheaf of sandpaper.

She took it. It was the dismembered body of Aerda, the village girl. It was like holding the corpse of some tiny animal.

"Work hard," Yamashita said, and he grinned at her.

Yasuko, back in her room in the girls' dorm, spread Aerda's parts on her bed next to the window.

The indents for the girl's comic-book eyes covered half her face. Everything about Aerda, from her exaggerated proportions to the pleats of her flared skirt, was exactly as Yasuko had drawn her in her character design sheets.

She gently poked Aerda's nose, no larger than a grain of rice.

She meant to start a first rough assembly of the figure tonight. As a guide she had a beginner's article on garage kits in a Japanimation magazine Yamashita had lent her. But its obsessive jargon and detail dismayed her.

Somehow Yasuko had thought she would just need to stick the pieces together and the figure would be done. But it wasn't going to be that easy.

With a sigh she slid open the windowpane. Her dormitory room was on the second floor, and all she could see was a cinderblock fence with spikes, and a bit of narrow alley beyond. She used to gaze out of the window like this, unable to sleep, when her lovesickness for Doi had been at its height. Stoking envy for her rival, or indulging in sweet fantasies. Imagining Doi turning up beneath the window, smiling up at her, calling her name.

Maybe Aerda had waited at a window for Galba to come, too, she thought. And he hadn't either.

Bittersweet nostalgia. Indulgent, of course. But better than feeling nothing, she thought.

Reluctantly she turned her attention back to the kit.

Apparently Dux wasn't going to make the Daglian Saga movie using traditional stop-go animation; it was going to base it, somehow, on the autonomous movements of the figures themselves. And in that regard, the key part of the assembly was stapled inside a small packet, thick and puffy. The bag had warnings not to open the packet until the figure had already been prepped. Otherwise, it said, Hisitomo couldn't guar-

antee that the figure would move as designed. The language was heavy, threatening.

Anxiety gnawed her, unreasonable, childish. What if she messed up?

If only it wasn't Aerda.

Yasuko had really thrown herself into creating this character. If her design for Princess Colleen encapsulated all her sense of ideal feminine beauty, Aerda was Yasuko's own little doppelganger – plain, but touched with inner beauty. It was as she liked to think of herself, anyhow.

And some day, according to the instructions, this little Aerda would walk and talk for herself. But only if Yasuko got it right.

What a responsibility.

She picked up the parts of the figure, Aerda's tiny limbs and hands, and began to work. Polish the pieces with sandpaper, paint them until the surface reeked of foul-smelling thinner, then polish them down again...

She worked into the night, using progressively finer sandpaper. The powder danced upward like smoke, drifting into her lungs, and her eyes itched uncontrollably.

By the time she was on No. 1500 sandpaper, she'd all but decided to skip the final finish with No. 2000.

But Aerda now seemed warm to the touch from Yasuko's body heat and the friction of all that sandpapering. The tiny figure seemed to look at her, with eyes that were still unpainted.

"I know, Aerda," Yasuko said. "I know."

Yasuko carefully tore the No. 2000 sandpaper into pieces small enough to handle, and went on working.

The next day Yasuko, heavy around the eyes, dragged herself to the university.

She was just in time for her third class. Chinese literature was a required course for her major, and she was enjoying the unit on Chinese poetry. She was thinking about starting a fanzine on Chinese fantasy literature.

Today, though, she had trouble concentrating. She itched to get back to Aerda.

Maybe this is how the boys, Yamashita and Kondo, have been feeling all this time, and I never understood, she thought.

Fifteen minutes before the closing bell the side door of the amphitheatre classroom swung slowly open. Toshio Doi tried to hunch his tall body over as much as possible as he slid quickly into an empty seat. Following him, clutching his shirt, was Masami Tsuda. The two students were a year ahead of Yasuko, and had clearly shown up just to meet their attendance requirements. When Masami spotted Yasuko, she gave her a cute smile, and quickly waved her hand. Yasuko forced herself to smile back. Masami – with her broad shoulders, that long mane of luxurious black hair – sat in front of her.

Colleen and Aerda, she thought. Masami and Yasuko. The parallels were too obvious, a cliché.

But that didn't make it any less painful.

When classes were done she avoided her fellow students, and hurried home, to Aerda.

Yasuko brushed off powdery residue with fingers made slippery, the tips worn smooth, by the hours of sanding.

Aerda's parts were now so finely polished they gleamed.

In the Daglian Saga, Aerda was particularly ill-starred.

The girl saved a wounded dragon on the outskirts of her village. The dragon understood human speech, and was really a man named Galba, cursed and transformed into monstrous form by an evil demon. But Aerda had to leave home when her own people blamed her for bringing such a fearsome creature to their small community.

As they journeyed together across the land Galba saved Aerda from attack after attack by frightful monsters. And as she tended his injuries, she found herself drawn ever more deeply to the dragon's sterling heart. She swore to herself that she would stay by his side forever, even if the curse could never be lifted and he remained in dragon form the rest of his days...

It was time to open that intriguing last packet. Yasuko gingerly untied the fastenings.

There were three black objects that reminded her of cockroaches, along with a small bag that rattled when she shook it, another that sounded as if it had sand inside, and a thin membrane barely a centimetre in diameter. The black objects looked like integrated circuits. But instead of the usual centipede-feet metal docking tabs these chips had a string of silvery snaps down their backs. Yasuko poked at the gadgets, bemused, faintly repelled.

In the story, Galba, it turned out, had already found the love of his life: the beautiful Princess Colleen. The princess was imprisoned in a tower labyrinth. He'd been turned into this dragon, horrible to human sight, when he fell into the clutches of a demon during a failed attempt to rescue her. Even now, his resolve to save her remained unshaken, even if it cost him his life.

Aerda realized that Galba's will was unshakeable. But she worked even harder to help return him to human form, wanting to do whatever she could for him, even if that would only end up helping her rival. Galba, oblivious, even asked her for advice about the workings of the princess's delicate heart. Meanwhile, Aerda thought her own heart would break time and again...

The bag also contained a four-page instruction manual. Yasuko flipped through it dubiously... *The multiple-value processor (MVP) assigns multiple values to electric signals – four values, in the case of the Hishitomo MVP ULSI.* She turned to the index. A ULSI turned out to be an ultra-dense large-scale integrated circuit. Hishitomo Institute, the leaflet boasted, was the first chip maker to produce a truly practical multiple-value processor. *In contrast to conventional signals rendered into the two binary markers 0 and 1, the Hishitomo MVP ULSI is capable of differentiating and processing two additional signals. One "Qit" of data can carry one of four different values, enabling vastly more complex and sophisticated processing operations to be performed in record time...*

And so on.

What it meant was that the little black objects were Aerda's brain.

There were three different versions, so the modeller could choose which part of the scenario she wanted to emphasize in the finished figure. The one for the first part of the storyline, where Aerda first met the dragon,

would result in a simple, naïve, easy-going girl. The second was for the middle of the tale, when Aerda was serving Galba with all her heart. And the last was for the Aerda who had survived all the plot twists, and made her final decision, and had grown into a fine, resolute young village woman.

Yasuko felt obscurely disappointed. So there would be no growth, no development, no real experience for this figure. She could give Aerda maturity, give her memories, simply by plugging in a new brain chip.

But then this was only a talking doll, she reminded herself, doomed to play out a prescribed storyline.

In the story, after many hardships, Aerda finally did transform the dragon back into a man. And she worked selflessly to break the secret of the labyrinth. But the moment Galba rescued his princess, he no longer had eyes for the faithful Aerda.

Colleen, her own white magic restored to her along with her freedom, told Aerda that she would give the village girl anything she wished for in gratitude for her help. Aerda forced a smile. *I once fell in love with a marvellous dragon, she told the princess. I only wish I could find a partner with such a wonderful heart.*

Colleen, unaware that Aerda's dragon had been Galba himself, cast her spell...

The small membrane turned out to be the figurine's vocal chords. Yasuko pushed it into the belly cavity and up into the throat with her finger as instructed. Then she dropped her choice of ULSI into the same belly cavity.

That left the sack stamped "NNP Seeds." These, it turned out, were actual plant seeds. There were about half a spoonful of them, looking like sesame seeds.

*NNP. Neural network plants, she read. NNP are a radically new kind of plant genetically engineered to transmit electric signals. Nourished by growth culture seeping into the body cavity through the porous flexible polymer, the NNP seeds extend microscopic mycelioid filaments toward the metal contacts on the MVP ULSI. The NNP grows into a neural network in accordance with data obtained from the ULSI. The NNP filaments continue to grow through gaps in the porous flexible polymer, reaching into every part of the figure's body...*

Yasuko did as the instructions said, pouring the seeds into the cavity, then attaching the lower torso with the enclosed tube of glue. Next, feeling queasy, she attached Aerda's limp arms and legs.

*When the NNP transmit a signal from the ULSI to a specific "address" connected to the NNP network, the flexible polymer contracts, making the figure move. Moreover, by exposing sensory cells differentiated from the rest of the NNP on the surface of the figure, it is possible for the MVP ULSI to obtain visual and auditory, olfactory and tactile sensory input. It will take 34 hours for the growth culture to permeate your figurine, and for the NNP to establish a neural network and run the full sequence of self-checks on the figure's autonomous movement repertoire. Make sure you have finished painting your character before she/he/it begins to move!...*

After the spell, Galba for the first time had felt the full force of the village girl's love.

But just as he was about to speak to her, Aerda stopped

him. I know I have triumphed over Colleen in love, she told herself. For I loved your manly spirit even when it was entrapped in the shell of a gruesome dragon. And that is enough. And she walked away, head held high.

Yamashita had especially approved of this last scene. "Aerda starts out as a strong-willed tomboy, but she grows into a transformed woman," he would say. "As juvenile fiction goes, it's a fine expression of the classic theme of personal growth and maturity."

That wasn't how it felt to Yasuko. She just felt desperately sorry for Aerda.

She poured water into the small basin she used for washing her dishes, and mixed in the sack of powder. It reminded her of her stomach medicine. Then she carefully lowered Aerda, looking human at last with her arms and legs in place, into the water.

Sunk to the bottom of the basin, the village girl could have been the victim of a drowning. Her blouse was moulded on, part of the upper body casting, but the skirt was a separate piece, so Aerda was naked from the waist down, her flesh seamless and unbroken.

It had actually been Yasuko's fault that Doi and Masami had got together in the first place. In fact she'd always suspected the only reason Doi had made such a fuss over her was to get closer to her friend Masami.

They were unlikely friends. Masami Tsuda had broken her leg skiing the year before, and hadn't been able to get the credits she needed in physical education. That put her in the same lower classmen's course as Yasuko. When they wound up in the same group for warm-up stretches, Yasuko was surprised to find that this lovely senior student was a manga comics fan the same as her. Before long they were shopping and hanging out together.

Masami had introduced Yasuko to Doi. They were both part of a group of friends planning a party. *I'm sorry, Yasuko. Doi's so stifling! You can talk about manga and all that otaku stuff. Would you mind covering for me until this stupid party business is done and finished?* And Masami's beautiful features broke into a cute little smile, and of course Yasuko agreed. Masami was a girl who was perfectly aware of how attractive she was, and knew that no one could stay angry with her for long no matter what she said, just so long as she turned on that winning smile.

Not even Yasuko.

Doi was the very model of the serious college jock, a track and field man. But Yasuko had read her share of boys' comics, and she was able to draw him out.

Mostly what she drew out of him, however, was his feelings for Masami.

The way he thought Masami was *cute*, the way he sighed after she left them, the way he would plumb Yasuko's knowledge of Masami's likes and dislikes.

But despite the uncongenial subject matter, as she sat with him and Doi's expansive laughter rang out in some coffee shop, gradually Yasuko found herself charmed.

In fact, dazzled.

And even when he was talking about Masami, after all, he was with *her*. She had allowed herself to dream, just a little –

"Oops! Sorry, Aerda..."

Yasuko pulled out a sheet of tissue paper, and carefully sponged off a bit of paint that had, while she was carelessly dreaming, spilled over the line of Aerda's skirt hem.

Painting on nice, flat Kent paper was a completely different story from working on the complex curves of a garage kit. The separate piece for the skirt was especially convoluted. She'd already put delicate highlights and shadows in Aerda's hair, and carefully shaded each and every lacing on her jacket.

When she was done Yasuko picked up Aerda herself. Aerda's skin, steeped in water, seemed smooth and even a little soft to the touch. Yasuko lifted Aerda so the figure's eyeless face was before her own huge eyes. The special paint for porous flexible polymers took a long time to dry. That made it easy to avoid streaking and smearing, but it was a pain when she had to apply multiple layers. Still, the coats she'd applied earlier looked to have set.

"Is your face all dry now? Well, then –" Yasuko stretched, and started in on the most difficult task of all – painting in the pupils.

She shaded in gentle auburn highlights on warm chestnut pupils, giving a deep and quiet expression to the village girl's face.

She allowed herself a smile. "Now that's not bad! Don't you think so, Aerda?"

At last it was time for the final touch – the freckles.

... *Is that what Doi's really like? I didn't realize...*

Yasuko remembered how Masami had breathed those words one night, her eyes distant, as her long, straight hair blew around her in the wind. It was the moment Yasuko's hopes imploded.

But even then, Yasuko played the good underclassman. She looked out for her elders' feelings, gave each of them a gentle push when they needed one, and finally made Doi's dream of winning over Masami a reality.

I'm the one who charmed Doi, she told herself. I'm the one who charmed Masami, too. It's me who's the really awesome one, way more awesome than Masami...

And that alone was her fragile, secret pride...

Yasuko froze, her brush still poised in her hand.

The brush point had split, leaving wedge-shaped blotches like hoof marks all over Aerda's cheeks.

It was a disaster – Aerda's face, of all things! It was her fault; she hadn't been concentrating. Now what? Trying to wipe the freckles off with tissue paper would just leave smears. The best option was to let the paint dry completely, then carefully shave the smudges off with an Exacto knife.

"I'm sorry, Aerda. I'll clean you all up tomorrow."

Trying to keep from trembling, Yasuko went ahead and glued on the skirt.

The next night she had to stay late to catch up on the work she'd been skipping, and it was past ten before she returned to her dormitory. The girl next door, with the shag haircut that looked so good on her, was having an endless phone call with some guy.

Yasuko opened her door. Her own small room seemed dark and utterly quiet.

She switched on the light, and stopped dead in her tracks.

Her desk was a mess. Spilled paint had made a flesh-coloured sea of the desktop. The spines of her textbooks were splashed, and her brush stand had toppled on its side.

Her heart thumped. Should she call the police? Or the dorm monitor –

*Clunk.*

It had come from behind the textbooks. She stared into the shadows, which her imagination readily populated.

“What was that? Who’s there?”

... Something very small was moving around behind the dictionary.

Yasuko stepped forward cautiously.

A figure, its torso coated with flesh-colour paint, was peering sheepishly around the edge of Yasuko’s Oxford English-Japanese Dictionary. That three-millimetre-wide mouth moved, and a light, tinny voice drifted across the room.

“Who are you? What is this place?”

It was – Yasuko recognized with a start – the voice of a popular actress, Alissa Nakagawa.

“Aerda?”

“You know me? Where am I? Is this a land of Giants?” The figure hung on to the edge of the dictionary with both hands as it thrust its upper body around the corner. Its manner was stunningly authentic, as were its timid face, the strained shoulders, the nervous feet.

Yasuko spread both hands, and softly stepped closer. The fearful Aerda fell back a step. “Don’t be afraid. I made – no, I healed you. And you are Aerda, of the hamlet of Teglia.”

At the sound of her name Aerda appeared to relax a little. She slowly stepped out from behind the dictionary. She left tiny flesh-coloured footprints as she stepped lightly across the desk. Porous flexible polymer reformed itself into an embarrassed frown. “The last thing I can remember is being attacked by a monster in the forest... Galba! Is he here? Do you know anything of a dragon?”

“Have no fear. Galba is not here. He is – another Giant is taking care of him.”

“Where? Let me see him!” The words were a wail of pain, as authentic as the rest of the modelling.

Yasuko suddenly found herself at a loss for words. I can’t just play with this creature like a toy, she realized. It was as if Aerda was in some sense aware. And if she was or was not, how could Yasuko tell?

“Don’t worry,” she said again. “I have to ask that other Giant when he can meet you. But it’ll be okay. In fact, that other Giant may just be able to give him a human body –”

“Turn Galba back into a man?” Aerda’s face was a small dish of misery.

Too late, Yasuko remembered the scenario. Galba had declared he would go straight to the labyrinth tower to seek his princess, as soon as he recovered his human form. For Aerda, Yasuko’s news could only mean that her happy days with her love would soon be over.

This is ridiculous, Yasuko thought. You’re debating with a kit figure, here.

“I don’t know for sure that he’ll do that. Just maybe. Look, try not to worry.”

“I’m sorry,” murmured Aerda, lacing her fingers.

Webbed with drying paint, they were getting sticky.

“What happened to you, Aerda?”

“I woke up and found myself in this strange place. And when I went over to look at one of those glass barrels, I saw my face reflected there, and my freckles were so dark! And some of them had such strange shapes... I thought I couldn’t possibly let Galba see me like that, and, and...”

She’d apparently thought she could cover up her freckles with skin-coloured paint. Aerda had wrapped her arms around a pot lid to twist it off, and instead brought the whole “barrel” right over. The damage stretched from Aerda’s right shoulder down across her entire body.

Aerda hung her paint-splashed head. Yasuko sympathized with her from the bottom of her heart.

“Come here,” she said gently. “Let me clean you up.” Yasuko wiped the desk with a dust cloth. Then she soaked a tissue in thinner, and started sponging away the spilled paint. “I’m going to remove your skirt for a little. Tell me if it hurts, okay?”

Aerda complied.

Yasuko used sandpaper to smooth out the excess paint. Sitting with her legs stretched out in front of her, Aerda intently watched Yasuko at work. She seemed to have no sense of pain.

“Giant,” she said, “you are very kind.”

“My name. It’s Yasuko.”

“Yasuko?”

“Sit very still. Now, lift your face. I’m going to fix your freckles.”

Aerda stretched up her face, as if waiting for a kiss.

Colleen was afraid of Yasuko. She hid behind Yamashita’s paint pots.

“I chose the mid-point setting in the story, too,” Yamashita told Yasuko. “So she keeps whining about whether ‘the knight who is supposed to save me’ has come or not. It’s driving me up the wall. And on top of that she cries. Sobbing all the time. No tears, though.”

Yamashita’s workmanship on Princess Colleen was woeful.

Colleen’s skin was rough to the touch and the paint hadn’t taken well. Yasuko wondered if Yamashita had slacked off on the polishing. The princess’s costume was very elegant with lush draping, but Yamashita had simply covered it with heavy layers of blue paint – a harsh primary colour – and in some places it had spilled over onto her skin. His paint work on her eyes was particularly clumsy. Colleen’s eyebrows were askew, and her eyelashes were simply three thick lines, crudely sketched.

Colleen, trembling, asymmetric, was much less appealing than Yasuko’s Aerda.

Of course, Yasuko mused, there was no reason why the story played out by these little characters had to follow the script.

Yamashita tripped Colleen with the handle of his paint brush. As she sprawled, he laughed.

That night she found the room dark except for a little night light. A book was propped open in the pool of light, and Aerda sat before it cross-legged. She was reading, mouthing the words to herself.

She turned. "Welcome home, Yasuko."

"That's my textbook. Are you reading Chinese poems?"

"I didn't have anything to do. I'm sorry –"

"No. Don't apologize. I'm impressed." The Aerda character had been conceived of as a girl with a keen natural intelligence, but who never had a chance for a formal education. "We have to pretty you up, Aerda. Tomorrow you can finally see Galba."

Aerda leaped to her feet. "Galba?"

"... And he'll be back in human form."

Aerda clapped a tiny hand to her mouth. "So he found Princess Colleen."

Yasuko gently stroked Aerda's head. "Don't you worry about Colleen."

"But –"

"Things have, umm, changed. Here now, let me manicure your nails."

Aerda rested her hand on Yasuko's left forefinger, and Yasuko picked up her brush.

Kondo was talking with Yamashita when Yasuko arrived at his boarding house. "... The wings were all right without reinforcing them with an aluminium rod. And the embossing work is really good. When I dry brushed in the highlights it got a lot more interesting. Actually, I wanted to try some pearl powder, but I wasn't sure if the stuff I usually use would work on these polymers... Yasuko, you're late."

"Sorry."

"There's someone here to meet you –" Kondo opened up a cardboard box on the floor.

Galba sprang forth, and Yasuko gasped.

The three of them bent and studied the prince, their faces looming like round moons over him.

Galba glared up at them. Dressed in rough clothes befitting an adventurer, without apparent fear, he whipped out his sword and faced them down.

Yamashita said, "He's cool..."

"Isn't he, though?"

He wasn't quite as sexy as in Yasuko's character sheet, but he'd been assembled and painted with Kondo's characteristic precision. Galba's skin was finished a manly bronze. He seemed a little grimy to Yasuko, but Kondo's use of highlights and shadow had brought out his three-dimensionality.

Yasuko noticed, for the first time, that the figure's hair and overall feel resembled Doi. Of course, given that she'd designed Galba, that wasn't really a surprise, she told herself wryly.

"Well, Galba," she said, "let me show you Aerda." And Yasuko gently lifted the village girl from the wicker basket she'd been cradling carefully. "Aerda, you can come out now."

Cautiously, Aerda climbed out of the basket, eyes wide.

"Whoa!" The two boys gasped, gratifyingly.

But Galba was staring, dumbstruck, at the beautiful girl. "Aerda...?"

On hearing the voice, Yasuko caught Kondo's eye.

He said, "Kaneo Shirasawa." Another actor.

Galba sheathed his sword, and slowly approached the village girl, striding across the worn and frizzled tatami

rice matting on the floor.

"Galba... Galba, is it you?" The girl's voice was trembling. She stared at Galba, as if dazzled.

But then she looked down, and curtsied. "Congratulations, my lord. You have recovered your original form..."

It was a line from the scenario. Galba the dragon had belonged to Aerda. But now Galba was a prince once more, and in this scene Aerda had to behave formally to him, to convince herself of the gap that had opened between them.

"Thank you, Aerda," said Galba. "I owe everything to you."

"To me?"

The three students glanced at each other. This late-scenario Galba figure would "remember" that it was Aerda who had restored him to his former self. But Aerda, programmed for the middle of the story line, still didn't know it herself. It was odd, thought Yasuko, watching these two people plucked out of time from different points of their destiny, trying to interact. And yet that destiny, it seemed, remained fixed, even so.

Or did it?

The prince held out his hand, and she timidly laid her tiny right hand on top of it. "Aerda. You're very beautiful. I hardly recognized you."

Kondo whispered, "Now that isn't in the scenario." Aerda shook her head, embarrassed.

Yamashita had produced a crumpled CD store paper bag. He dragged the princess out unceremoniously and plopped her on the tatami floor. The blue of her clothes was harsh, ridiculous.

Galba, seeing her, cried out. "Colleen!"

Yasuko watched, enthralled now.

How about it, Galba? Isn't Aerda lovely? Far lovelier than Princess Colleen – and she has a beautiful heart as well. You don't have to stick to the story. Tell her quickly. Tell Aerda you love her more than the princess.

But Galba ran to Colleen's side, and kissed the hem of her skirts.

Aerda's hand fell. Her brown, shimmering eyes were wide open.

Galba embraced his princess.

"Hot stuff," murmured Yamashita. He was actually blushing.

Aerda had grabbed hold of Yasuko's skirt. "Yasuko," she said. "Let's go home."

Yasuko couldn't help herself. "No! Why has it got to be this way? Look at her! Her eyes are different sizes. Her eyelashes are blotchy, her eyebrows are cockeyed. There's nothing pretty about her, not her body, not her clothes –"

The boys were watching Yasuko, stunned, mouths hanging open.

"But that doesn't matter," Aerda murmured. "Don't you know that, Yasuko? Galba loves her, and that's all. No matter how she looks, how ugly she is, his love won't change... Didn't I love Galba even when he was a dragon?"

Galba had eyes only for Colleen. Just as Doi only had eyes for Masami. No matter how much Yasuko prettied herself up, she could never be Masami. And no matter how lovely Aerda became, she would never be Colleen.

Aerda placed her hand on Yasuko's fingertip. "Don't cry," she said. Her little hand, so tiny it could rest easily on her finger, was so very soft, so very smooth, and so cold it broke Yasuko's heart.

"I shouldn't have brought you here," Yasuko said.

Aerda was studying her. "I haven't lost, Yasuko. I know that Galba is Galba no matter what he looks like. I know that all those gentle things about him, those wonderful things about him, will never change. And look at me! I'm proud of myself, Yasuko. But —"

"Yes?"

"Please give me back my freckles."

That night Aerda slept beside Yasuko's pillow. She used a washcloth for a coverlet. Yasuko could not hear the figure breathing through the night. But still she felt a profound peace, and was soon asleep.

"They found a bug in the NNP," said Kondo.

It was the evening of the next day.

"What kind of bug?"

Kondo fell silent. On the phone line Yasuko could hear a waitress's voice taking orders, and a background murmur of people. He said, "Come down to the coffee shop, as quick as you can. I've already called Yamashita."

"What kind of bug, Kondo?"

Kondo sighed. "When did you make Aerda?"

"... It was the 8th."

"Six days ago, huh? Then she's only got four more days."

"What?"

"It's the NNP. It dries up in ten days."

Yasuko turned around. The freckled girl had her back turned to her, and was intent on reciting a Chinese poem. When she turned a page she looked like a miniature sailor handling a great paper sail.

Kondo said, "Yasuko —"

Aerda smoothed down the new page, and smiled up at her Giant.

Apparently, Kondo said, Hishitomo had considered going ahead with a full launch of the NNP figures – even if they only lasted ten days – because they thought kit fans had such short attention spans that a week or so would be enough for them. But somebody had pointed out that these otaku kids got extremely attached even to figures that didn't move. When "living" figures began to die, all over the country, it would be a public relations disaster. So Hishitomo had decided to recall the trial figures they had sent to their prize winners.

Even Yamashita had a pained looked on his face. Yasuko was twisting and twisting the coffee shop's yellow napkin in her hands. Kondo glared.

"So what are they going to do with the figures?" Yasuko snapped. "Pulp them?"

"I don't think they'd do anything like that," said Kondo, but his eyes were oddly dead, Yasuko thought, like a fish's. "Hishitomo say they're very sympathetic toward our feelings. Apparently they're already testing some kind of drug for extending the life of assembled figures. The sensitivity of the sensors on their skin will degrade, but —"

"And you believe them?"

"Come on, Yasuko," Yamashita said, concerned, embarrassed.

"Yeah!" Kondo said. "I do believe them. And I'll tell you why. They want to keep the merchandising rights. So they do think this situation can be resolved, Yasuko —"

"But the figures – our figures – are going to die? Aren't they?"

Yamashita gulped down the cold dregs of his coffee. "Yasuko, we're all going to die someday. And it's not as if these are people —"

"You've seen them. You've seen the way they interact. How can you say that?"

Kondo cut her off. "This is getting us nowhere. I think we should return the figures to Hishitomo. Better to at least have some hope, to bet on the new medicine. Instead of having them die before our eyes." He glared at Yasuko, challenging her to disagree.

The white light of the street lamp poured through Yasuko's window, lighting up their two faces, small and large.

"Aerda?"

"What is it, Yasuko?"

"This Chinese poem. You were reading it the other day, weren't you?"

"*Ka Zan Ki?* I like that one. All about how he was thinking of the one he loved one night, and when the reed screen in the window moved, he thought maybe she'd come to him... Waiting by the window, just like us. Unrequited love is just so sad."

There was something moving in the air, beyond the window. Silver, rustling, like leaves.

Yasuko whispered, "But tonight's different."

Gliding in upon the light, its soft wings spread to their fullest, flew a dragon: the dragon that Kondo had thrown toward Yasuko's room from the back alley.

Aerda gasped. "Galba!"

It was a muscular, magnificent dragon, wings and scales aglitter. It came to light on the darkened window sill. When Aerda sprang to his side, the pattern that Yasuko had so carefully painted along the hem of her skirt twisted and turned. The dragon gently caressed the girl's head with a curled foreleg.

But Aerda stepped back. "It isn't Galba."

"It is, Aerda. It really is."

"Oh, Yasuko. Doesn't he have his princess now? Don't talk about silly dreams like that."

"I don't mean the Galba you met before. It's the Galba you loved, the Galba that loved only you. It's Galba the dragon." The dragon, of course, implanted with the appropriate chip... "He said he's decided to be with you forever."

"You're lying!"

"It's true. And you have to go with him, Aerda."

Aerda looked from one to the other, the girl's face, the exquisite dragon. Yasuko saw how her movements were a little stiff, restricted. Aerda was already growing old. "I won't go," she said.

"You don't understand —"

"What about you, Yasuko? It's as though I'm leaving part of myself behind."

"Listen to me, Aerda. I'll be all right. I – you helped me. You showed me how I won out over my own Colleen, in my own world." She fought to keep her voice level. "You see, I don't need you any more."

Aerda stepped towards her. "Yasuko, it's so strange. I want to cry, but no tears come out!"

"That's something I couldn't fix. But maybe other Giants can help you. Galba's going to take you to them."

"I'm afraid, Yasuko."

"Don't worry. I've asked them to make sure you and Galba can be together always. And then, when you get all well, you come back home here with your dragon, okay?"

"I will. I absolutely will come back to you, Yasuko."

Stiffly, the freckled village girl climbed onto the back of the dragon. "Yasuko –"

"Yes?"

"Next time, win for real. You understand? No more fooling yourself. No more justifications or moral victories. Win for real."

Then the dragon dove off the window sill.

For a time Yasuko could not even move.

Two months later a Japanimation journal ran an interview with the production manager at Dux. The visual media corporation had revised its original plans, and would be making the Daglian Saga using traditional cell animation.

Yasuko, Kondo and Yamashita tried to find out what

had happened to their figures, but Hisitomo was impenetrable. Hisitomo wouldn't even confirm it had received all the figures safely.

Maybe somewhere Aerda and Galba were free, Yasuko thought. But it was impossible, of course.

Day by day, the flesh coloured footprints the figurine had left on Yasuko's desk faded away. Every night, Yasuko left her window open for a while before she went to bed.

*Aerda.* The freckled girl that Yasuko's soul and hands had brought to life. That little mirror that reflected the very depths of her heart. *Ka Zan Ki.* If she was alive –if she was free – Aerda knew that Yasuko was waiting for her by the window. Unlike Doi, unlike Galba, Aerda would understand what Yasuko was feeling as she waited there.

Yasuko watched the curtains waving in the night breeze.

(Translated from the Japanese original by Dana Lewis, with assistance from Stephen Baxter)

**Hiroe Suga**, born 1963, lives in Kyoto, Japan. Her first published short story was "Blue Flight" (SF-Houseki, April 1981), and her first novel was *Shiera in the Flickering Forest* (Asahi-Sonoroma, 1989). She has published many works of sf, mystery and fantasy. She has not previously been published in English. The above story, first published in Hayakawa's SF Magazine in 1992, won the Seiun Award (the Japanese equivalent of the Hugo)

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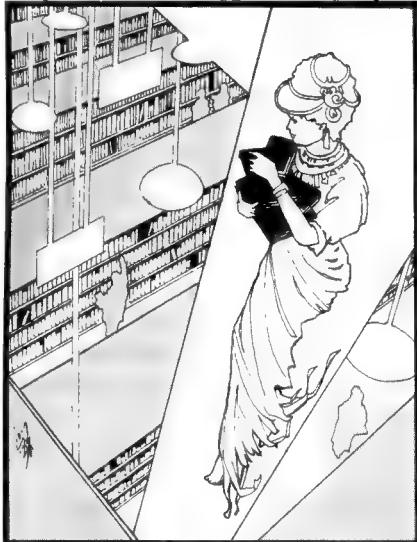
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## BOOKS



REVIEWED

# Thrillers, Techno- and Otherwise

Chris Gilmore

In my boyhood Malthusian Theory was used to plot rising populations curves against the presumed maximum productive capacity of the Earth, and to prophesy wars of extermination as they neared the point of intersection; in my young manhood it was all about industrial collapse following exhaustion of irreplaceable natural resources; now it's about degradation of the environment and extinction of wild species. The first version crashed under the observation that as people become more materially affluent they breed less, leading (most notably in western Europe and Japan) to negative natural increase; the second lost credit when people like Herman Kahn and Jerry Pournelle did a few sums and applied a few observations about substitutability; the third will, I think, be significantly more robust, being based on non-falsifiable subjective rather than objective criteria.

In terms of this third version, population increase is no longer the problem, nor is poverty. The existing numbers, all demanding a luxurious lifestyle contingent on massive direct and indirect energy consumption plus "personal space" (as sacred a cow/catchphrase now as was *Lebensraum* in the 1930s, and with a similar meaning) will be sufficient to bring about either a prosperity-based ecosasm or the sort of physically comfortable but spiritually arid existence prophesied most notably by Isaac Asimov in such stories as "Strikebreaker" and *The Caves of Steel*. This concept underlies Frank M. Robinson's *Waiting* (Forge, \$23.95), although he

cheats slightly by assuming a steeply rising population curve as well.

The story is structurally reminiscent of his own *The Power* (1956), in which a lone individual pursued a criminal mutant with superhuman mental and physical powers – so much so that I found myself wondering throughout if Robinson would dare attempt a variation on the highly effective shock twist which he used last time. If you haven't read *The Power*, I therefore advise you to read it after this one; it has stood the test of time remarkably well, and the contrast will afford scope for amusing lucubrations about what has and what has not changed in US society over four decades.

On this occasion there isn't a lone superman but an entire species, related to but different from ourselves, and with (in their own eyes) rather better cred as the pinnacle of evolution. Up to about 35,000 years ago things had been going rather nicely, thank-you: the most advanced hominids lived peacefully in small tribes, in harmony with nature, and communicated with each other by a non-verbal form of telepathy. That idyll was abruptly destroyed by a rival hominid mutation. It was, by comparison, gracile but rather shoddily constructed, with a much shorter life-expectancy; by way of compensation it had the gift of speech, conferring the huge collateral advantage that it could lie unblushingly, and a total lack of inhibition about murdering its moral and intellectual betters. Hail, Cro-Magnon man! (aka our good selves).

By means of heroic self-sacrifice and selective breeding for the Cro-Magnon appearance (What that?

Don't ask!) a corps of the Old People has survived unto the present day, but not unmodified. They have shed much of their inhibition about murder (of us, at least) and refined their telepathic powers into a weapon capable of projecting homo/suicidal impulses into unwary brains. Moreover, they have decided that our inroads into Mother Earth now justify precipitating Cro-Magnon auto-genocide, after which they will emerge to re-establish Harmony with Nature. Remember Charlie Manson? Right on!

Newswriter Artie Banks, the protagonist, stumbles on their secret and the game's afoot. It's a pacy, suspenseful game, fully rewarding (until the last few pages) the necessary suspension of disbelief in Old People survival. (Regarded objectively, generations are too long and the stated pace of change too fast for them to have bred as described in the time.) Beneath it lies the Big, Important Question: Ought Artie to be resisting at all? Are the Old People really the rightful inheritors of the Earth, and ourselves accidental interlopers, best hurried off the stage?

This book is very much a survival from an older phase of sf – the era of Mark Clifton, Wilmar Shiras and innumerable forgotten Campbell-inspired clones – and the writing is a bit rough; Robinson uses "like" promiscuously for "as" and "as if," but for me its ultimate failure lies in the characterization and the moral postulates. Robinson makes the tyro's error of introducing a *soi-disant* superman who, like so many such, combines the worst aspects of wimp and simp; and while, as a *homo sapiens*, I'm prepared to acknowledge a whole slew of racial folly and crime, I can't join with Robinson in placing our habit of exogamy and (shudder!) *miscegenation* high on that list. Regretfully, therefore, I can recommend this one only if you're heavily into racial purity.

An unknown South African wit once invented the jibe that AIDS stands for Afrikaner Invention to Deprive us of Sex. Certainly, the idea that disease can single out practitioners of what liberal-minded people regard as acceptable practices offends a deeply rooted sense of natural justice. Nancy Kress has latched onto this emotion and used it to good effect in *Stinger* (Tor, \$24.95), the story of how a very widespread disease (malaria) is intentionally and elegantly mutated into an especially lethal form which pinpoints the very group that had previously been least at risk from it – carriers of sickle-cell anaemia. As those are almost exclusively black the perpetrators have an obvious motive, but



how many white supremacists have the brains and resources to mount such an operation?

That's the problem confronting Agent Robert Cavanaugh of the FBI and epidemiologist Dr Melanie Anderson of the Center for Disease Control. They aren't working on their own, but in the tradition of such thrillers the police-procedural element soon takes a back seat as Robert and Melanie both get thrown off the case but decide to carry on together anyway, not much trusting the competence or the honesty of their erstwhile colleagues. This is highly conventional, not to say hackneyed, as is the sub-plot of whether Melanie and Robert will wind up in bed. Auguries are mixed, Robert having a history of ineptitude in sexual relationships (both referred to and demonstrated in the text) and Melanie making a point of never dating white guys. As she says, a black professional woman is circumscribed: if she checks into a hotel for a conference, she has to wear a suit, lest she be mistaken for a hooker or a chambermaid; and even in her suit, there's always the suspicion that she may not be there entirely on merit, but at least in part courtesy of the Affirmative Action Program.

The story trickles entertainingly along from disappointment to exasperation by way of sundry red herrings as the two edge ever closer to unmasking the conspiracy, and thus into ever greater danger, but the denouement when it comes is deeply unsatisfactory. The story gives the impression of having been yanked bodily out of its true path so that the perpetrator can be revealed as a real-life, named organization. Personally, I'm prepared to ascribe as much wickedness as you like to the outfit involved, but the entire sequence of events is so foreign to its usual style and methods that I remained stubbornly unconvinced. Others will have other prejudices, but with the best will in the world, I can't see this book enhancing Kress's reputation. She's principally known for sf, and this barely qualifies as a technothriller; and for a thriller, there are just too many clichés, notwithstanding her many effectively chosen epigraphs or even her excellent command of the telling detail. An interesting experiment that doesn't quite come off.

In Bristol, and doubtless elsewhere, there exists (if we're to believe new writer Mick Lewis) a repellent male sub-culture. Not being pervaded with violent crime it doesn't quite qualify as underclass, but could easily be mistaken for one, being anti-literate and relentlessly squalid. Its members' lives revolve round: a series of short-

lived, ill-paid, dead-end jobs; largely futile attempts to get women into bed; petty crime; and the consumption of beer and video nasties.

Such is the milieu in which Jack, the 30-ish protagonist of Lewis's *The Bloody Man* (Citron, £5.99, B-format), has dwelt reasonably content until someone opens a horrible theme-pub nearby. Tastefully called The Slaughter Inn, it's a place well worth avoiding, as the beers on offer are all unfamiliar brands with names like Old Corpse, and the entertainment consists of a very loud band whose lyrics express deeply-felt hatred and contempt for the clientele. On the other hand, there's an attractive barmaid; on yet a third hand, Mr Bane, the relentlessly sinister owner/manager, seems to have some sort of special feeling for Jack. What horrid, forgotten secret links them? What links both of them to the legend of Sawney Bean?

For those unfamiliar with that legend, Sawney Bean was a disreputable character who lived with his girlfriend in a cave system in Ballantrae about the turn of the 15th/16th century. They sustained themselves by highway robbery and murder, and as they retained and ate the corpses of their victims, it was many years before the disappearances on the road were attributed to a single factor. But their 14 children and 32 (incestuously conceived) grandchildren eventually became too much for the locally available food supply, so they were forced to range further and were thus discovered. They were flushed out, and executed without process at Leith.

For some reason never made clear Lewis attributes the legend to the 17th century, but regardless of how long ago, Bane, who identifies with Bean, feels he and his tribe ought to be avenged – and the vengeance would be in some way incomplete without Jack's participation. Predictably enough, sinister events begin to cluster round Jack who, being no great friend of the police, neglects to report his suspicions even after two of his closest friends go missing. After all, the murder of his girlfriend's cat (by the attractive barmaid) had failed to rouse their interest, so why should they care about a ne'er-do-well and a pizza delivery-man? Events therefore proceed dutifully and unimpeded towards the *grand guignol* finale.

It's really a very silly story, but Lewis moves it briskly along, never allowing the thin supernatural thread to break, even while offering a more conventional explanation in terms of bad heredity and worse environment. I read it with a certain revolted gusto, less for the suspense than for the background detail which

opened a window into an aspect of life in contemporary Britain which it would surely be disagreeable and might well be dangerous to experience directly – and isn't that what horror fiction's all about?

In *Oath of Fealty*, Niven & Pournelle postulated a dingus that allowed one person's brainwaves to be read, decoded by computer and relayed to the appropriate receptors in another brain. As the dingus was quite capable of coaxial traffic the effect was close enough to true telepathy. Being hedonistic, technophile optimists, N&P concluded that the experience of making love while thus linked would be physically and spiritually awesome.

They were, of course, presuming that the couple in question were good friends with many interests in common. John Barnes, whose view of the human condition is somewhat bleaker than theirs, has postulated a very similar dingus for "Gentleman Pervert Off on a Spree," the opening and longest tale in his new collection *Apostrophes and Apocalypses* (Tor, \$24.95), but applies it differently. Here the couple are Aura, a hooker, and Ken Greer, her client, but they're not just any hooker and client. She perceives herself as a genuine sex therapist, her project being to make a nicer person of Ken – and doesn't he need it! For although he perceives his phenomenal sexual appetite as inspired by a ladish but harmless urge to get laid as often as possible ere youth fades utterly, he is actually an extreme misogynist, whose general hatred of women is manifest in a specific urge to be cruel to their nipples. When they couple each experiences the other's deepest distress in a positive feedback of loathing, fear and disgust.

Two questions are posed, and explored at some length: will the experience of confronting his innermost evil work any real improvement on Ken? and if so, will it be worth the wear and tear on Aura, whose desire to be of service doesn't amount to a masochism equivalent to Ken's sadism? Somewhat frustratingly Barnes reaches no positive conclusion, but it's an interesting idea, intelligently approached, and may well prove to be relevant – the dingus is among the more likely inventions of the next couple of decades.

After that the remainder of the collection is anticlimactic, except for "Bang On!", a very clever send-up of the entire alternate-history genre. "Between Shepherds and Kings," a rather fey piece about a man doing his best to honour his moral obligations, is really neither sf nor fantasy, but reads better in this context than in the anthology *Free Space*, where it first appeared; "Empty Sky" is a curi-



REVIEWED

ously old-fashioned fantasy, reminiscent of Heinlein's "Magic, Inc"; "My Advice to the Civilized" is a neat variant on the post-debacle story; but the rest failed for me. "Stochasm," "Under the Covenant Stars" and "Restricted to the Necessary" are all based on ideas I found too inherently unconvincing for the suspension of disbelief; "Delicate Stuff" is a feelgood story which telegraphs its ending; there are a couple of weak jokes, and that wraps up the fiction.

I wish I'd seen *The Towering Inferno* again when it was on TV recently (whenever these words appear, this 1974 movie will have been on TV recently.) The writer was Frank M. Robinson, the author of a new novel called *Waiting* (Forge, \$23.95), and it would be interesting to compare the two. I looked up the information in Kim Newman's *Nightmare Movies* (1988). The film needed "hatable human villains to blame their catastrophes on" and was written to emphasize the fact that "if the world is turned upside-down the luxuries with which the rich surround themselves will get in the way as they try to climb... down from their penthouse, in impractical evening dress."

Something similar goes on in *Waiting*, except that it's not so much human greed that is being scalped as human assumption: that we, *Homo sapiens*, are the dominant species on the planet... A doctor runs from something he cannot see, only feel, and in a run-down part of San Francisco, he is confronted by voices in his head, and killed, shortly before which the reader is treated to some choice clichés: "Who, who...?" he bled. His voice drained away. He was afraid for a moment that he was going to lose control of his bladder, and then, of course, he did..." Of course. In this book, bladders go mad at the twitch of a shadow.

The doctor was part of a group, one of whom, Artie, investigates the murder, believing that the doctor was about to share a secret. Not that Artie is without problems: an adopted son in a wheelchair, who saves Artie from certain death on a number of occasions, and then goes a.w.o.l.; a wife who doesn't love him (but why? and it's not for a customary reason); and a father-in-law on his deathbed in another city... The fact that the doctor could have prescribed drugs is a possible motive, but is not believed. The doctor's wife disappears, and Artie learns about a corpse that the doctor worked on: "If the man hadn't died, our guess was that he would have lived a lot longer than a healthy hundred... the man's physical strength

The essays offer far more consistent quality, even though I don't agree with all Barnes says – that's more than half the fun. In particular, in "How to Build a Future" he appears to rest his faith on theories of political and economic cycles that I had thought dead as Bode's Law. His concept of "Inward Turn," which looks like Spenglerian decadence but which he claims to be something else entirely, amply repays exploring, and I also find myself in broad agreement with the closing essay, "The Kids are All Right," though

it expresses my reason for rejecting several of the preceding stories. And finally, I applaud Barnes unreservedly for having written the following paragraph, which opens "Deep in the Heart of Genre":

There are a lot of writers, of science fiction and everything else, who say they don't pay any attention to the critics. There's even a term for such writers. They are called liars.

**Chris Gilmore**

## California, London, the Moon and Hostile Planets

*David Mathew*

was certainly beyond the norm."

Artie dreams of primordial scenes: members of one tribe being butchered by the Flat Faces "for meat." The man the doctor worked on "was a modern descendant of a different species, one that dates back maybe hundreds of thousands of years." The Old People are among us, waiting for us to wipe ourselves out with civil wars; then they will be the dominant species. "Look at your history books," Artie is told. "They're nothing but a recital of battles won and battles lost with the victors sitting atop a mound of skulls at the end!... You

exterminated the Neanderthals and then you went after us..."

Artie is forced to look close to home for some of his answers: the meeting group, his life-long friend, and even his own family. People are lying to him – but who? But why?

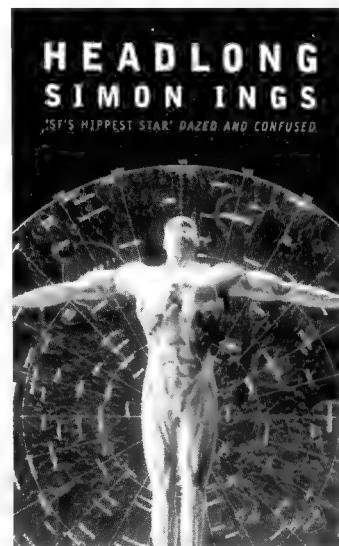
Too much is given away in the packaging. When a novel has a shout-line of "the biggest must-read thriller since Neanderthal," has various shapes of human skull on the cover, an inside

quote from Loren C. Eiseley's "The Fire Apes," and a back page line of "They are among us, and they've been here for a long time – waiting," it doesn't take a genius to work out which way this novel is going. But if you are looking for something to read *easily*, you could do a lot worse than *Waiting*.

Simon Ings's *Headlong* (Voyager, £5.99) takes longer to read, and mingles hard sf with surrealism. It's more complicated (both in plot and in language), and is nearly perfect. Chris Yale is in a clinic: "...imagine someone gives you other senses, beyond those you were born with. Imagine you can see the full gamma spectrum, hear the harmonic whine of tensile stress, feel electric flow, and smell magnetism... Next imagine that, several years later, that same someone takes those sense away from you." This is what's happened to Chris, and he needs treatment. While working on the moon (with the woman who would become his wife) he had the aforementioned sensual faculties. Returning to earth, they were stripped away, leaving Chris to be what the local kids (and others) call a "metal-head" – or a post-human...

Yale is hauled to London, where he is questioned in connection with his wife's death. Yale wants to know what Joanne was into, and after speaking to her sister, he goes to the flat, where he

finds a drug called Jewel, where he's attacked, and where an explosion occurs – "so loud I didn't hear it. I felt myself jelly in the force of the blast..." Yale remembers the moon: the theme park that began with each of the designers bringing different tastes to the project; the city that Joanne wanted to build. It transpires that the workers' brains have been used for corporate gains: "we birthed something they'd not expected and could not control." Still in the past, Yale recalls the work that he



and Joanne were almost involved in: "We need a couple of people with... holes in their heads to carry these accessories out to Madagascar," and he cannot help but believe that the reason for his wife's death was that she found herself a brain-pimp. Both Yale and the reader have much to learn.

**C**hina Miéville's *King Rat* (Macmillan, £9.99) is set entirely in London. The father of a man named Saul is murdered, and the suspicion falls on the son. He's taken to prison, but escapes thanks to King Rat, who speaks entirely in Cockney rhyming slang, as well as in a "strong London accent, an aggressive, secretive snarl." Having rescued Saul, he passes on the truth: "We're out of that world now. No more people and no more things, get it?... Sitting there in your borrowed duds like a fool, waiting patiently to get took before the Barnaby. Think they'll take kindly to your whids? They'll bang you up till you rot..." Maybe it's because he's a Londoner that he loves London so, but Miéville has risked alienating a lot of people. The rest of the narrative is pure simplicity, and well written. Saul is taught how, as a rat (which is part of the escape deal), he must forage for food and climb and exist in filthy sewers. King Rat passes on other information: "Your mum was a rat." And then, later still: "You're a ratling boy. Just got to learn the tricks... We've a kingdom to win back." Not that King Rat is a happy-go-lucky rodent all the time. After Saul decides to wander, he is reprimanded (dictionaries out, please): "Stow your parley, you little fucker. Don't come the misunderstood. Don't ever be fucking off on your tod, got it?... Care to share the whys and wherefores of your little exhibition, eh?" I had no problem with the argot, but others might, and it's only right to mention it. All the while, the mysterious Ratcatcher is gaining solidity in the reader's mind...

These rodent high jinx are balanced against the human story of the people that Saul has left behind. The policemen guarding Saul's father's home are also murdered; again, the suspicion falls on Saul... A woman has made Jungle, Hip Hop and Drum and Bass music her reason to be; she is approached by a man who suggests collaborating with her —

on flute. Does it work? Why does he do so? And what's the significance of the music anyway? Miéville is clearly passionate about this type of music, and does his best to convince us of what we've been missing. I don't like Hip Hop, but I admired Miéville's energy in trying to tell me how great he finds it.

**T**his month, women are writing about places further afield. One has been writing since 1953, when she published "Freedom of the Race" for *Science Fiction Plus*: Anne McCaffrey. And the other has recently begun: Katie Waitman.

#### With *Nimisha's Ship*

(Transworld, £16.99) McCaffrey tells the story of Nimisha Boynton-Rondmense, an heiress. Deciding from a very early age that the privileges and trinkets were not to her taste, she develops an interest in shipbuilding. After spending time in a shipyard, she designs a spectacularly intelligent space yacht, and goes out into the nevermore to test a Mark 5 prototype (cutely rechristened the Fiver.) The vessel — containing Nimisha and her small crew of artificial intelligences — is dragged through a worm-hole, and ends up on a planet that Nimisha calls Erewhon. ("Well, it is the back of nowhere, isn't it?")

Hers is not the first craft to have landed there. Of a previously stranded crew, two men, one woman and a child have survived, but are badly malnourished. Nimisha and her team bring them back to health, with the child enjoying his milk and burgers (the descriptions of eating go on for pages), and Nimisha enjoying the company of one of the men, if you follow my drift. (By page 224, the American McCaffrey seems to be writing in the dialect of her adopted Ireland: "Oh, shaggit," she murmured, feeling her belly and wincing as she prodded her breasts. 'I am pregnant...')

It's a fairly pleasant story, and nicely told, but not a great deal happens. The female survivor enjoys a bath, for example. There is talk of the birthing miscarriages that occurred before the Fiver arrived. While investigating another crashed craft, the humans are attacked by "aliens, who used tools, who had once been space-farers... how long had they been marooned?" Their efforts to communicate and learn

from one another, a little bit later, are the best parts of the book, with the child coming into his own as a source of inspiration. The humans even get the aliens to appreciate their food and drink! All the while, the party that is looking for Nimisha is drawing closer.

**I**reviewed Katie Waitman's first novel, *The Merro Tree*, for *Interzone* last year; and it was with pleasure that I received her second, *The Divided* (Del Rey, \$12.95). No "second-album syndrome" here: it is easily as entertaining as the debut, and anyone with any experience of the Middle East cannot fail to be enchanted. The evocations of desert life are magnificent; and the cast is extremely strong. *The Divided* is a novel about religion, and the inadequacies of those who cannot accept an alternative point of view. Consider: "The Spirit of Not-God resented being so cast aside and watched jealously as God invented the living creatures, including the Mauhetti who worshiped [sic] him. In a fury, the Spirit of Not-God retaliated by creating manlike creatures of its own, beings who did not worship God. Thus was born the Eternal Conflict, the War between the Forces of God and Forces of Not-God, which shall not be resolved until the end of Time..."

Waitman has chosen a woman to be her central character. Sekmé is a brutal and brilliant commander, "at the unheard-of age of twenty-four," determined to crush the resistance. While fighting among streets that smell of "the rank Tel-mari stew of fried goat organs and fermented cabbage" (a lot of *cabbage* in this novel) she hides in a building where she meets an old man who should be her enemy. Instead, despite their mutual disgust, they work together to annihilate a group of terrorists. When Sekmé returns to her troops she points fingers at the company traitor, who jealous of her success, failed to relay her requests for back-up forces. The man in question escapes, but we know he won't be gone forever.

Sekmé goes home to her family. These are wonderful scenes: the cumbrous uncle, who has married her mother; the sightless brother ("the genetic result of his father's exposure to an experimental, and since banned, exfoliant") who loves her dearly, and to whom Sekmé has taught the concept of colour. And so on. Waitman's descriptive powers are first rate. It should also be noted that Waitman has jumped a long way from the narrative sands of her first novel; which can only lead a reviewer to conclude that here is a writer with a bright future ahead.

**David Mathew**



China Miéville with, inset, the cover of his novel, *King Rat*



If you do nothing else this month, you really should "meet" Eddie Gamete in whose novel, *Trash Tango*, the human race has become so feeble that the invasion of Earth is brought off by means of a single memo and thwarted only by the discovery that the rampaging aliens are allergic to pasta; plus the silver-tongued Dante Hinton Cubit, who once broke into a premises, called the cops and had the occupants arrested for burglary; and Findlay Tax (aka The Entropy Kid), who, with a psychosis "you could hang your hat on," is not averse to carrying an Uzi machine gun to an evening orchestra recital.

These are just three of the inhabitants of Beerlight, a fractured and (possibly) futuristic version of everyday Earth where cop tanks prowl a hostile terrain of needle bars and diced rubble; where crime is an artform and lives are but splurges of colour on the palettes of both miscreants and police authorities alike; and where, amidst a wandering population of bomb zombies building up the courage to pull the pin on themselves, a woman gives birth to a bullet-proof child.

All of this (and more... much, much more) is the brainchild of Steve Aylett and features in his novel *Slaughtermatic*, recently released by Orion Publishing's Phoenix House imprint (£9.99). And as for actual story...

Well, Dante and the Entropy Kid, the latter chewing frantically on painkillers and toying with the idea of ending it all, stroll into a bank with enough armament to start and finish a medium-sized war but are held up in the execution of their intended robbery while Dante discusses semantics with the teller. When the time eventually comes to escape, Dante must foil the bank vault's timelock (which plunges thieves unable to key in the correct code into a future 20 minutes on, in which they are already handcuffed and surrounded) by means of a canny piece of hacking courtesy of the local computer whiz, Download Jones. The hacking throws Dante backwards 20 minutes back to before they actually entered the bank and...

The authorities, meanwhile, can call upon an arsenal which includes the "crucifixion bomb," which releases a hemispheric flux affecting the guilt centres of the brain and immediately converts those affected to Catholicism... then, while the victims are unable to look each other in the eye, the cops round them up before they can lapse.

And so it goes on. Think of a five-way collaboration between Edward Lear, Ken Kesey, Philip K. Dick, Kurt Vonnegut and Damon Runyon and you'll have just a little bit of the flavour of *Slaughtermatic*. But only a little bit – the rest you'll only get by reading the book. All human life is there... and then some.

## All Human Life... and Then Some

Peter Crowther

Ned Champion gets ditched by his girlfriend just before he's due to take a camping trip into the Lost River wilderness area. Well, so what? he thinks. *That's no reason to cancel the trip: I'll simply go it alone.* But the stark and overbearing solitude works a strange character-change on Champion and, before long, it gets him into some difficulties.

At first, the change is subtle: a growing desire (and then a need) for total isolation, involving Champion in skilfully avoiding the occasional backpacker or two while, paradoxically, succumbing to the desire to observe them, "peeping tom-like," while hiding at very close quarters. This, in turn, emphasizes his growing aspirations for power and stealth.

But then, as the geographical point at which he must turn back is reached and ignored, Champion becomes as wild as the land itself. It's not long before one of his "observation" exercises goes wrong and from there just a short hop before he resorts to violence against other wanderers who have strayed into what he now considers to be his own private domain.

Richard Laymon has never been a name associated with subtlety and the 100-page *The Wilds*, the first in a beautifully-produced new series of limited-edition hardcover novellas from CD Publications (\$30), is no exception to the rule. But, even despite its occasional excesses – which don't occur until well into the second half of the book – *The Wilds* is fiercely readable... a kind of "Tarzan meets *Lord of the Flies*."

While Laymon's brand of in-your-face literary pyrotechnics may not be to everyone's taste, there's no denying the power and imagery of his narrative... particularly the section early in the book where Champion is holed up in his car during the night not daring to venture outside even to empty his bladder. Needless to say, by the end of the book, such wimpish character traits have completely disappeared.

*The Wilds* is a fascinating story,

both for the way it chronicles human deterioration and in the author's credible and creditable refusal to go for the easy ending and, instead, opt for something altogether more believable.

While in the UK Laymon has a legion of followers, he is still relatively unknown in his US homeland – a fact he does not hesitate in letting us know in his excellent *A Writer's Tale* (Deadline Press, \$35).

This is a gem of a book – part autobiography (including photos), part "how to be a writer" treatise, part fiction (with a few uncollected early stories, unashamedly offered – and while they may not be out-and-out clunkers, these babies are unlikely to appear on any genuine Award shortlist!) and part caustic lambast of both the publishing game and the people who write reviews... particularly negative ones (Hey, Rich, I liked it, okay?). He even goes to the extent of pre-empting those cringe-making staples of every interviewer by "answering" the obligatory "What are your favourite (fill in the appropriate)?" question. Thus we discover Laymon's favourite 10 vampire books, his 47 favourite non-horror movies, his 60 favourite horror movies (I didn't think I could even name 60 horror movies, favourite or otherwise, but when you run down the list... they're all there), his 10 favourite playwrights... and so on.

It may sound indulgent but it's not. It may sound trite and self-congratulatory, but it's not that either. Laymon sounds off on topics such as writer's block, book covers, outlines, rejection, real jobs, and... money; and, in doing it, he's incisive, witty, entertaining and, occasionally, scathingly brutal (with names named and dates dated). This is not a man to get on the wrong side of. But in case it sounds as though it's simply an opportunity for him to repay debts and favours, it's much more than that, too.

Laymon closes the book by spending the final 100 pages or so explaining the writing of each of his 26 novels (up to and including 1997's *After Midnight*) and printing a full bibliography of short-story appearances. This is a book to delve into time and time again – particularly for anyone involved in the field or anxious to get into it. Heartily recommended.

William Maxwell has been praised by such luminaries as John Updike, Penelope Lively and Richard Ford, though his books are neither widely known nor highly regarded by UK audiences. And that's a shame. Although, generally speaking, Maxwell's fiction is a contemporary of (and, some might say, an inspiration to) the likes of Updike and Ford – not

to mention John Cheever and John O'Hara – his 1980 American Book Award-winning short novel *So Long, See You Tomorrow* should be a heady dose of pure joy to lovers of dark fiction and crime/suspense.

Newly re-released in a beautiful paperback edition from Harvill Press (£5.99), *So Long* revolves around the story of a murder and the subsequent defilement of the victim (his ear is removed) in a rural Illinois small town of the 1920s. The story is slowly revealed by a man who was a small boy at the time, a long and detailed first-person recollection some 50 years after the event that is every bit as fluent and as seamlessly flowing as the very best television documentary, with every few pages turned colouring in another small section of the canvas.

The tale tells of family life, of lust and affection... and of how the curious and malformed offspring of the two can turn even the strongest friendship until, the resulting wound left to fester, it erupts into violence. There's more

depth and emotion in these 130 dense pages than you'll find in many currently available doorstop-sized tomes and you'd do well to check it out.

**A**nd finally, it's good to see Dennis Etchison back – and back with a vengeance – with the breathlessly readable Hitchcock-flavoured suspense thriller *Double Edge* (Pumpkin Books, £6.99).

Although ploughing a different part of the literary field to Maxwell, Etchison, too, knows the value of writing tight copy, peppering with sharp dialogue and tense thought-progression the bizarre tale of a husband-and-wife team fighting to get their version of the Lizzie Borden killings on the small screen while, around them, people they know have strange fatal accidents... accidents that slowly seem less and less accidental and less and less coincidental. Then someone starts using an axe, and it seems as though life is beginning to imitate art... or, at least, history.

**R**emember the Good Old Days (whenever they were for you) before sf got to thinking it was literature and developed pretensions, when sf stories were... well, fun to read? When they managed to pack mind-expanding ideas, exotic alien worlds and space-travelling futures into entertaining adventure yarns? If you do, then you might be tempted to say – they just don't write them like that any more.

But, according to Gardner Dozois, they still do. Dozois, of all people, should know since he is the most important and influential sf-magazine editor in the world so when he says that there are plenty of exciting and readable sf adventures being written, and collects some in an anthology, chances are people will go out and buy it. Or rather – them, since there are two anthologies, both from St Martin's Griffin, *The Good Old Stuff* (\$15.95) which showcases the way things were, and *The Good New Stuff* (\$17.95) with stories from the modern era aimed at convincing us that strong, entertaining sf is still with us.

The stories collected in *The Good Old Stuff* range across time from 1948 (van Vogt's classic confrontation between a lone human and a formidable and inimical alien, "The Rull") to 1964 (Ursula Le Guin's early Hainish story, "Semley's Necklace") and beyond. Most stand up amazingly well: Murray Leinster's "Exploration Team," for example, while a touch two-dimensional on characterization, is a textbook example of how to set up a story and move it along, as well as being, as Dozois points out, the quintessential tale of human explor-

The characterization is beautifully drawn and, as in Richard Christian Matheson's equally masterful *Created By* a few years back, the insights into the American west coast TV and movie industry are as fascinating as they are disconcertingly alien.

I devoured the final 50 pages – a cat and mouse stalking chase set in and around a well-to-do residential block during a heavy storm – in about 20 minutes, initially picking up one word in two and quickly getting to the point where I was scanning lines to get to the next development as the story progressed to its inevitable bloody conclusion.

*Double Edge* should be compulsory reading both for anyone wondering how to write a 180-page genuine suspense novel and for those screenwriters who wish to improve on recent big-screen showings (most notably the pathetic *Halloween H2O*) and emulate the great work of Robert Bloch. A bravura novel.

Peter Crowther

when I read (and re-read) it 30 or so years ago, Poul Anderson's after-the-holocaust saga, "The Sky People."

One of the very few stories I hadn't read before was Gordon R. Dickson's "The Man in the Mailbag." Expecting a dated turkey, I found myself both amused and thoroughly charmed by this admittedly lightweight page-turner. Fritz Leiber's "Moon Duel," however, turned out to be a dreadfully weak little piece that dated from 1965 but read as if written a good two decades earlier – why didn't Dozois choose something like the brilliant "A Pail of Air," for example? Leigh Brackett's Martian stories failed to charm me back in the Good Old Days and "The Last Days of Shandakar" with its purple prose style and paper-thin lost-city Martian setting failed just as thoroughly again.

Slightly worryingly, given the wealth of material he had to draw on, I couldn't always agree with Dozois as to what constituted an sf adventure. While I love Jack Vance, especially at novel length (and actually rate the story on display here) "The New Prime" isn't one in my judgement, and nor is Aldiss's evocative tale of the far future, "A Kind of Artistry." This classification dispute, limited to a couple of stories here, looms much larger with the second volume, *The Good New Stuff*.

First though, what works in the second collection. There are two delightful stories, "Poles Apart" by G. David Nordley, about an amiable aquatic alien struggling to get along with humans on a multispecies colony-world, and "The Return of Kangaroo Rex" by Janet Kagan,

## Stuff and Nonstuff

Neil Jones

ers versus a hostile alien world. There are also some smoothly-told and engaging series stories: H. Beam Piper's parallel-worlds yarn, "Gunpowder God" (the first section of the novel *Lord Kalvan of Otherwhen*); the lightweight but enjoyable Viagens story, "The Galton Whistle," by L. Sprague de Camp; the short but atmospheric "The Second Night of Summer" from James H. Schmitz's excellent *Agent of Vega* collection; and something from the weird and wonderful Instrumentality universe of Cordwainer Smith, the short, intense "Mother Hitton's Littul Kittens." Then, two singletons, C. M. Kornbluth's slightly formulaic "That Share of Glory," and, from the brink of the New Wave, Roger Zelazny's still-dazzling "The Doors of his Face, the Lamps of His Mouth," set on an oceanic Venus, from a time when Zelazny was producing classics by conveyor-belt. For me, though, the most impressive story here is one that is as astonishingly vivid now as



which has quirky colonists tackling home-grown bio-problems on their isolated planet. Both were, like the Dicksons, unpretentious page-turners, the kind you actually enjoy reading – as opposed to having read. Score two for Dozois: exactly the kind of stuff I thought they didn't write any more and wished they did.

The excellent Vernor Vinge has a story here from 1988 I had not come across before – "The Blabber," set in the inventively baroque future of his *A Fire Upon the Deep*, in which a youth and his alien pet make their way in a universe turning strange and dangerous around them. This, combining the story strengths those older stories had with bold fresh concepts, was the high point of the book, and Dozois earns major praise for including it.

Good, but not delivering the same level of satisfaction, were R. Garcia y Robertson's "Gone to Glory," which boasts an inventive future background and a nicely-moving plot, Maureen F. McHugh's "The Missionary's Child," set on a colony world reverted to barbarism (which scores with the sheer excellence of the prose), Tony Daniel's worthwhile time-war tale "A Dry, Quiet War" and Stephen Baxter's "Cilia-of-Gold," a below-par look at alien life on Mercury. "Escape Route" by Peter F. Hamilton is clearly adventure sf, strong on background and hi-tech ideas, but the prose was tech-heavy and the far-too-many characters, including spaceship captain and hero Marcus, were little more than name-tags, the bad guys in particular: Antonio and Jorge are respectively a stone-hearted assassin and a scheming ne'er-do-well, but why was it so hard to keep track of which one was which?

Then there's George Turner's "Flowering Mandrake": now, yes, this is truly a modern version of stories I used to read decades ago – stories that were crap then and seem even more so now. What merit Dozois perceives in this utter turkey was beyond me when he included it in one of his Best-of-the-Year anthologies and is even harder to grok on rereading. It's the sort of story that, fed to impressionable sf virgins, would set them firmly against the genre for life.

Enthusiastic agreement with the inclusion of one of John Varley's Eight Worlds series, "Goodbye Robinson Crusoe," and Bruce Sterling's tale of the Shaper/Mechanist war, "Swarm," both of which are strong and memorable works, although they're fair game for the Good Old Days themselves, dating from 1977 and 1982 respectively. But – and it's a Very Big But – their presence here highlights the shameful absence of a Larry Niven Known Space story from either volume.

Biggest But of all though is the question of what is or is not an adventure story. George R. R. Martin's Hugo-winning "The Way of Cross and Dragon," about a disillusioned priest pursuing galactic heresy, certainly isn't my idea of one; nor is Walter Jon Williams's Buddhist-based future tale, "Prayers on the Wind"; Mary Rosenblum's bitter downbeat "The Eye of God"; or either Paul McAuley's or Robert Reed's complementary takes on far-future immortal ennui, "All Tomorrow's Parties" and "Guest of Honor."

These are all, however, readable enough stories. Not so Michael Swanwick's "The Minotaur," a pointless, ultra-pretentious far-future retread of guess-what-myth: it isn't adventure, it isn't fun to read – and when you finally get through it you wish you hadn't bothered: and that, in a nutshell, is what many ordinary ex-sf readers claim is wrong with modern sf. And those tempted to give it another chance via this book may well conclude – wrongly – that it has no corner left for them.

If Dozois isn't out to con the peasants by deliberately slipping them a "brilliant" "literary" story then we're in trouble – because if he truly believes the Swanwick is the kind of story ex-sf readers have been pining for for the last few decades, bearing in mind he's the *numero uno* of magazine supremo, there are grim implications for the current position and future direction of the sf field.

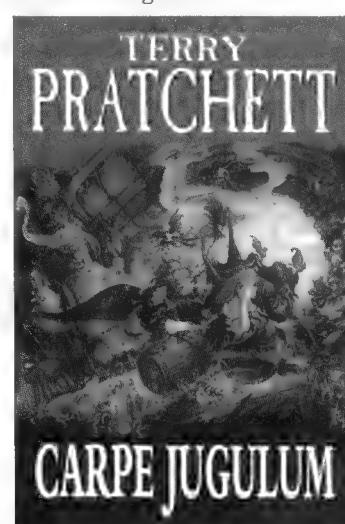
**I**t's a great relief to turn to two writers who can and do deliver entertainment – as well as a lot, lot more – Lois McMaster Bujold and Terry Pratchett. Bujold's two most recent books have appeared on the shelves with heartening speed, first *Memory* some months ago and now *Komarr* (*Earthlight*, £5.99). Both further detail the career and exploits of her handicapped hero, Miles Vorkosigan. In *Memory*, not quite recovered from his temporary death in the previous book in the series, he suffered medical complications and lost both his much-prized military career and his secret identity as galactic mercenary leader, Admiral Naismith, although he did land the consolation prize of Imperial Auditor, a post of enormous power, responsibility and

story-potential. This latest book takes Miles to Komarr, conquered by his militaristic homeworld, Barayyar, a generation ago, to investigate what may be accident or sabotage to a soletta involved with the planet's long-gestating terraforming project. In the process, it introduces us – and Miles – to Ekaterin Vorsoisson, whom Miles falls in love with. Interestingly, Ekaterin is roughly the same age as just-past-30 Miles, married, and with a young son: a romance seems unlikely, but plot complications begin to tug the two together. Ekaterin differs from Miles's usual love-interests: she's no galactic adventurer, and thanks to her bad-news husband, she lacks confidence in her own abilities. As the story – and a fascinating Komarran plot to throw off the Barayaran yoke – unfolds, she is tested and comes through. Alternating viewpoints between her and Miles, Bujold is still able to give both her characters pivotal and complementary roles in events, and tell an involving human story at the same time.

In reviewing the slow-starting and rather introspective *Memory*, I wondered if perhaps her superstar status in America was beginning to lead her away from the unpretentious readability she displayed in her earlier books down the slippery "literary" slope. There's certainly no sign of this in *Komarr* which, although admittedly a slow starter, builds strongly and satisfactorily. Bujold is on fine form, exploring both her characters and her future background, this time detailing restive Komarr, with its linchpin status to the Barayaran empire as multi-wormhole trade nexus and, crucially, single exit for Barayaran to the rest of galactic society.

Through eight Miles Vorkosigan books, two prequels that centre on his mother, Cordelia, plus two sidebar novels, Bujold's universe has grown into one I am enormously pleased to revisit and I am already looking forward to her next Vorkosigan book. Meanwhile, this one's highly recommended.

**T**he latest Discworld book, *Carpe Jugulum* (Doubleday, £16.99), from the ever-reliable Terry Pratchett, features the formidable Granny Weatherwax who first appeared in *Equal Rites* (not exactly true: the Granny of that early work was more the Clark Kent version than the Super Witch of the later books). In *Wyrd Sisters* with its Shakespearean style shenanigans (an extract from which was published here, in *Interzone* 26) Granny acquired a coven:





jolly hard-living Nanny Ogg and dreamy Magrat Garlick. The witches travelled far and exotically in *Witches Abroad*, saw off an elf invasion in *Lords and Ladies*, and visited the opera in cosmopolitan Ankh-Morpork in *Maskerade*, where the coven acquired its newest recruit, young plump Agnes, literally in two minds about herself.

The mountain-perched, pocket-size kingdom of Lancre has also grown in solidity if not size – there's even a map of it for sale now. It's also gained an ex-jester king, and a queen – Magrat Garlick (hence the opening in the coven). This time danger threatens when Magrat's royal husband innocently invites a vampire family, with sinister modern ideas about running a king-

dom, into Lancre. At the same time, Granny's nose is put seriously out of joint, so it's left to the rest of the coven, plus an Omnanian priest called Mighty Oats (who has a daunting conversion task ahead of him in Lancre) to take on the all-powerful vampires.

While the story that follows is comfortingly familiar, Pratchett makes it all seem fresh and satisfying as well as fun, the latest solid chapter in the on-going Weatherwax saga. Rather surprisingly, there are still new things to learn about these characters as well as simply enjoying the pleasure of their company, and, as always, the book is both shrewd and highly amusing at the same time. In short, it's vintage Pratchett.

(For the real Granny W. fans out

**T**hey might sound the same to our European ears, but the natives north of the USA lay claim to their own identity with an impressive national sf magazine. *On Spec* is a digest-sized English-language Canadian magazine (as opposed to the French-Canadian periodicals *Solaris* and *imagine*). Any sf magazine which has reached its 33rd issue, a regular quarterly, publishing eight to ten stories per issue, deserves high praise simply for being there. First published in 1989 by a group of Canadian writers, it enjoys financial support from the Canada Council and lottery money from the Alberta Foundation for the Arts.

The Summer 1998 issue features ten stories, including a gem that demands a place in anyone's Year's Best. Brent Hayward's "Cleaner" is a story of conceptual breakthrough. A community of cleaners spend their lives, as generations before them, cleaning the rust and dirt off the underside of an endlessly long bridge which spans an empty ocean. They're victims of their culture and its narrow assumptions, all admirably worked out by the author. Then a cleaner crosses the boundary of this closed world, yet despite the dull nature of the revelation, the story is lifted beyond its metaphor-soaked framework by Brent Hayward's professionalism: a resistance of temptation to explain all.

At the other end of reality, in the grim near-future all us paranoiac luddites see new technology seducing us toward, is David Hull's "Families." In this world, we calm our fears for our children's safety by planting a video camera in their

there, she and Nanny Ogg also appear in a rare and delightful Pratchett short story, "The Sea and Little Fishes," in the recent all-original anthology *Legends* edited by Robert Silverberg [Tor, \$27.95], in which Granny is – politely – requested not to enter the Lancre annual best-witch contest.)

Let's see: that's two books I'm really glad to have read – and, much more importantly, got real pleasure from during the act of reading itself. Now I come to think of it, that's the kind of reading experience I remember from my Good Old Days.

So, two books I'd label Good Stuff. Perhaps some people do write them the way they used to after all.

**Neil Jones**

## North of the Border

*Nigel Brown*

foreheads, then spend our days watching the world almost through their eyes. I love it. No doubt plans for these cameras exist somewhere already. Hull scores by taking this as the starting point, then demonstrating its use as a weapon between warring spouses. The drama is played well, stretching this story beyond hard sf into a horror of domestic strife.

Other stories of note include "Strange Harvest" by Edward Willett, where a town is plagued by deadly exploding vegetables. The pay-off is weird enough to work, and cliché is deftly sidestepped at the last moment.

A first publication by Steven Mills, an ambulance paramedic, proves the old adage "write what you know." Mills transfers his experience to the Moon, with a harrowing account of life with a team of Lunar paramedics. His "Chasing the Dragon on the Sea of Tranquillity" marks a promising debut.

Annually, the spring issue of *On Spec* features set themes. Subjects covered in the past have ranged from Dark Fantasy, through Canadian settings, to this year's – Music. The editor freely admits that

"with a budget of millions" (surely less?) "we would have included a CD in this magazine." As it is, a list of suggested listening is featured at the beginning of each of the nine stories, music selections from Van Morrison to Vivaldi. This works surprisingly well, as many of the tracks are so well known (Dylan's "Tangled Up In Blue," "Every Breath You Take" by The Police) that you don't have to actually turn to your gramophone (or CD player) to run the music through the head before reading the story. The strongest fiction in this issue is "Duende" by Apollonia Leaf (!), in which a vampire encounters an innocent girl on a Southern California beach in the 1960s. This story has a delightful cameo by the Delta bluesman Mississippi John Hurt – the last notable appearance of a bluesman in sf I can recall was Robert Johnson in "Crossroads" by Paul J. McAuley (*Interzone* no. 46, April 1991).

Nebula Award-winner Robert J. Sawyer has contributed an "On Writing" column to *On Spec* for the last three years. Sadly this has now ended. Perhaps it was featured because the magazine was founded by writers themselves – if so, it was a good move because the column has been a useful, well-written addition to the fiction. Continuity is important, but hard to achieve when so many disparate subjects are featured in the stories. This column served the crucial purpose of linking the issues of *On Spec* together. I hope the editorial team find a replacement for Mr Sawyer. The column doesn't have to be about writing, although after twelve issues a tradition has been established – it would be a shame to drop it for no reason.

I've only got one real gripe – the tagline used to read "The Canadian Magazine of Speculative Writing." Fair enough. That's what it is. Now it states "More than just science fiction." Come on, guys! "Just science fiction"?

**Nigel Brown**



# BOOKS RECEIVED



DECEMBER  
1998

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

**Aldiss, Brian. *The Twinkling of an Eye, or My Life as an Englishman*.** St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-19346-7, 484pp, hardcover, \$29.95. (Autobiography of a major sf writer; first published in the UK, 1998 [not "1999"] as it states inside; proof copy received; published at the age of 73, this is Aldiss's first full autobiography, as opposed to his more anecdotal "literary autobiography" of some years ago, *Bury My Heart at W. H. Smith's* [1990]; a very good read: touching, colourful and as lively as ever.) April 1999.

**Altner, Patricia. *Vampire Readings: An Annotated Bibliography*.** Illustrated by Joan Temo. Scarecrow Press, ISBN 0-8108-3504-5, x+163pp, trade paperback, \$19.50. (Bibliography, alphabetical by author, of vampire fiction; first edition; covering almost 800 items, there are additional sections on anthologies and young-adult fiction, and full author and title indices; the plot descriptions and other annotations seem to be usefully informative.) Late entry: November publication, received in December 1998.

**Baxter, Stephen. *Traces*.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-649814-0, 359pp, A-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf collection, first published in 1998; 21 unconnected stories, of which a dozen first appeared in *Interzone*; reviewed by Brian Stableford in IZ 133.) 4th January 1999.

**Besher, Alexander. *Chi*.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-682-3, ix+306pp, C-format paperback, cover by Bob Warner, £10.99. (Sf novel, first edition [?]; third in the "Rim" series; despite the author's international background and American residence [see below], certain clues – e.g. the single

quote-marks round the dialogue [a common, but not universal, British publishers' habit], and the acknowledgment to "Tim Holman, Lisa Rogers, and the terrific crew at Little, Brown/Orbit" – would seem to indicate that this is a UK-originated book.) 7th January 1999.

**Besher, Alexander. *Mir*.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-722-6, ix+306pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bob Warner, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA [?], 1998; involving "epidermal programming" and sentient tattoos, this is a second novel by an American writer ["born in China to White Russian parents and raised in Japan"] whose first [1994] was entitled *Rim*.) 7th January 1999.

**Bishop, Michael. *Time Pieces: Poems*.** Edgewood Press [PO Box 380264, Cambridge, MA 02238, USA], ISBN 0-9629066-7-0, 90pp, trade paperback, cover by Jamie Bishop, \$12. (Sf-flavoured poetry collection, first edition; a fairly substantial "slim volume" of Bishop's verse from over the years, it's divided into "Stories" [i.e. narrative poems], "Meditations/Speculations," "Personals" and "Imitations"; many of the pieces first appeared in sf anthologies or magazines, with a few from mainstream literary journals; some are previously unpublished.) No date shown: received in December 1998.

**Bova, Ben. *Sam Gunn Forever*.** Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-79726-7, 278pp, A-format paperback, \$5.99. (Sf collection, first edition; spacefarer adventures of Bova's continuing hero, who also featured in an earlier collection called *Sam Gunn Unlimited* [1992]; the stories are mainly reprinted from *Analog* and *Science Fiction Age*.) December 1998.

**Cherryh, C. J. *Fortress of Eagles: A Galasien Novel*.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648370-4, 335pp, A-format paperback, cover by Les Edwards, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1998; a follow-up to *Fortress in the Eye of Time*.) 18th January 1999.

**Chippindale, Peter. *Laptop of the Gods: A Millennium Fable*.** Simon & Schuster, ISBN 0-684-81613-X, 420pp, C-format paperback, cover by Stephen Player, £9.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; the cover gives the sub-title as "A Millennial Fable," which may be what the author intended; born 1945, Chippindale is a well-established British journalist who has written many non-fiction books as well as an earlier novel, *Mink*, which passed us by but was described by the *Daily Express* reviewer as "an *Animal Farm* for the Nineties.") 1st December 1998.

**Cook, Glen. *Water Sleeps: Book Three of Glittering Stone*.** "The Eighth Chronicle of the Black Company." Tor, ISBN 0-312-85909-0, 412pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; follow-up to *Bleak Seasons* [1996] and *She is the Darkness* [1997]; the back-cover blurb states: "If the Joseph Heller of *Catch-22* were to tell the story of *The Lord of the Rings*, it might read like the *Black Company* books.") March 1999.

**Delville, Michel. *J. G. Ballard*.** "Writers and Their Work." Northcote House [Plymbridge House, Estover Rd., Plymouth PL6 7PY], ISBN 0-7463-0867-1, x+102pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (Critical study of a major sf writer, first edition; this is the latest in a long-running series of academic monographs published in association with the British Council, and the first that *Interzone* has been sent for review; authors previously covered include Peter Ackroyd [1998], Kingsley Amis [1998], Angela Carter [1994], William Golding [1994], Doris Lessing [1994], Salman Rushdie [1998] and J. R. R. Tolkien [1997]; we also note with interest that a 1998 volume on E.

M. Forster was written by Nicholas Royle; the present volume is an up-to-date and well-informed primer on Ballard's work, by a critic who teaches at the University of Liège, Belgium; recommended.) Late entry: November publication, received in December 1998.

**Douglass, Sara. *Enchanter: Book Two of The Axis Trilogy*.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-651107-4, xiv+706pp, A-format paperback, cover by Rob Kiely, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in Australia, 1996.) 4th January 1999.

**Eddings, David and Leigh. *The Rivan Codex: Ancient Texts of The Belgariad and The Malloreon*.** Illustrated by Geoff Taylor. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224696-1, 394pp, C-format paperback, cover by Taylor, £12.99. (Illustrated companion to the Eddings' various fantasy series, first published in 1998; it consists of a short "autobiography" of the character Belgarath the Sorcerer, together with various "holy books," "histories," "gospels" and other matter pertaining to his imaginary world.) 4th January 1999.

**Edwards, Graham. *Stone & Sky*.** "Book One of the Stone Trilogy." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-651070-1, 357pp, A-format paperback, cover by Les Edwards, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; described as Edwards's "fourth novel" [though we have only seen two from him previously, *Dragoncharm* (1995) and *Dragonstorm* (1996); apparently the third was called *Dragonflame* – why weren't we sent that?], it opens in 1883 with the explosion of Krakatoa, and involves slippage into some parallel world of stone-age folk and dragons.) 19th April 1999.

**Evans, Peter J. *Mnemosyne's Kiss*.** "Virgin Worlds." Virgin, ISBN 0-7535-0380-8, 380pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £6.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a debut novel by a new British writer, and the first in the "Virgin Worlds" list dedicated to new sf and fantasy by mainly British authors [see also under Trevor Hoyle and Glenda Noramlly, below].) 18th March 1999.

**Gough, Val, and Jill Rudd, eds. *A Very Different Story: Studies on the Fiction of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*.** "Liverpool Science Fiction Texts and Studies." Liverpool University Press, ISBN 0-85323-601-1, ix+188pp, C-format paperback, £15.95. (Anthology of academic essays on the work of American socialist writer Gilman, author of the feminist utopia *Heraclia* [1915] and the classic ghost story "The Yellow Wallpaper" [1892]; first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £32 [not seen].) Late entry: November publication, received in December 1998.

**Grimwood, Jon Courtenay. *reMix*.** Earthlight, 0-671-02222-9, 360pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; Grimwood's third novel, following *neoAddix* [1997] and *Lucifer's Dragon* [1998]; like the earlier books, it's cyberpunkish; the slogan on the cover is "William Gibson meets Quentin Tarantino" – but we're not sure those two needed an introduction.) 5th April 1999.

**Hogan, James P. *Outward Bound: A Jupiter Novel*.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86243-1, 220pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Juvenile sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; it's odd that this series of super-American teenage novels in the Heinlein mould is being written in the main by British-born expatriate writers – usually Charles Sheffield, but now James Hogan.) February 1999.

**Hoyle, Trevor. *Mirrorman*.** "Virgin Worlds." Virgin, ISBN 0-7535-0385-9, 470pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf/horror novel, first edition; proof

copy received; unlike the other writers represented so far in the "Virgin Worlds" line, Trevor Hoyle is an old-timer, author of many sf and quasi-sf novels published since the 1970s; the present publishers describe him as "the covert genius of British sf" which is one way of putting it; this novel is dedicated to Hoyle's friend Laurence James, another "covert genius" or, to express it differently, the hack author of scores of pseudonymous paperback-original series novels published mainly by Harlequin Books' "Gold Eagle" imprint in Canada; Hoyle also knows a thing or two about toiling in the pb-original salt-mines, since he wrote several "Blake's 7" spinoffs in days gone by.) 18th March 1999.

Jarrett, Dick. **The Millennium Tapes**. Citron Press [Suite 155, Business Design Centre, 52 Upper Street, London N1 0QH], ISBN 0-7544-0025-5, 216pp, trade paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first edition; a debut novel by a new, but not young, British writer ["Married with three children... Now retired"], this is another product of the self-publishing "New Authors Co-Operative.") No date shown: received in December 1998.

Jones, J. V. **A Cavern of Black Ice: Book One of Sword of Shadows**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-694-7, 804pp, hardcover, cover by Greg Call, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition [?]; Jones's fifth novel; see the interview with the author in this issue of *Interzone*.) 14th January 1999.

Kearney, Paul. **The Iron Wars: Book 3 of The Monarchies of God**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06313-0, 255pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Crisp, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; the first two volumes of the trilogy, *Hawkwood's Voyage* and *The Heretic Kings*, appeared in 1995 and 1996, so it has been rather a long wait for the third; in the meantime Paul Kearney has moved to the United States.) 18th January 1999.

Kilworth, Garry. **Land-of-Mists: Book III of The Navigator Kings**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-762-5, xvi+380pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mark Harrison, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1998; conclusion of the author's Polynesian trilogy; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 138.) 14th January 1999.

Krausser, Helmut. **The Great Bagarozy**. Translated by Mike Mitchell. Dedalus, ISBN 1-873982-04-6, 153pp, B-format paperback, cover by Claudia Andrei, £7.99. (Literary fantasy novel, first published in Germany, 1997; it concerns a woman psychiatrist and a young man who works as a professional magician; according to the blurb, this is "one of the most acclaimed German novels of recent years and is currently being made into a film"; the author was born in 1962, and has written plays, novels and short stories.) 28th January 1999.

Lapine, Warren, and Stephen Pagel, eds. **Absolute Magnitude**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86449-3, 320pp, trade paperback, cover by Kevin Murphy, \$16.95. (Sf anthology, first published in the USA, 1997; *Absolute Magnitude* is an American small-press magazine [which began life under the title *Harsh Mistress* — a Heinlein allusion that the world at large didn't comprehend] devoted to hard-edged sf adventure tales, as represented in this anthology, the first to be drawn from the magazine's pages, by authors such as Terry Bisson, Chris Bunch, C. J. Cherryh, Hal Clement, Don D'Ammassa, Alan Dean Foster, Janet Kagan, Geoffrey A. Landis, Sharann Lewitt, Barry B. Longyear and Allen Steele, among others.) December 1998.

Lindskold, Jane. **Changer**. "A novel of the Athanor." Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-78849-7, 499pp, A-format paperback, \$5.99. (Fantasy novel, first

edition; although set in the 20th century, it seems to be Arthurian.) December 1998.

London, Jack. **Fantastic Tales**. Edited by Dale L. Walker. Foreword by Philip José Farmer. Bison Books [University of Nebraska Press, PO Box 880484, Lincoln, NE 68588-0484, USA], ISBN 0-8032-7979-5, x+223pp, trade paperback, £10.50. (Sf/fantasy collection, first published in the USA as *Curious Fragments*, 1975; this is the American edition of October 1998 with a UK price and publication date added; it contains 14 short stories and a novella, mostly sf, first published between 1895 and 1918; the most notable items are "The Scarlet Plague" [see description in my review of Jean Hegland's *Into the Forest*, IZ 130 — DP] and "The Red One" [about an alien entity discovered on a South Sea island]; the most regrettable item is the future-war story "The Unparalleled Invasion" [about the genocide of the entire Chinese people by the West]; despite lapses, the muscular socialist [but sometimes racist] Jack London was perhaps America's nearest equivalent to H. G. Wells; recommended to all those interested in the history of sf.) December 1998.

Lumley, Brian. **The Source: Necroscope III**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86764-6, 379pp, hardcover, cover by Bob Eggleton, \$26.95. (Horror novel, first published in the UK, 1989.) December 1998.

McAuley, Paul J. **The Invisible Country: Stories**. Introduction by Kim Newman. Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-79299-0, 310pp, trade paperback, \$13.50. (Sf collection, first published in the UK, 1996; McAuley's second collection, it contains nine stories, including three from *Interzone* ["Gene Wars," "Dr Luther's Assistant" and "The True History of Dr Pretorius"]; the others come from such sources as *F&SF*, *New Worlds*, *New Legends* and *Omni Online*; reviewed by Peter Crowther in IZ 123; although this American edition is appearing over two years late it appears to be enjoying a good reception over there, judging from the comments in *Locus*.) December 1998.

McHugh, Maureen F. **Mission Child**. Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-97456-8, 385pp, hardcover, \$20. (Sf novel, first edition; McHugh's third novel, following the highly-praised *China Mountain Zhang* [1992] and *Half the Day is Night* [1994], it's set on another planet.) December 1998.

McKenna, Juliet E. **The Thief's Gamble: The First Tale of Einarinn**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-

688-2, 437pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a debut novel by a new British writer who lives in Oxfordshire.) 7th January 1999.

Moorcock, Michael. **The War Amongst the Angels: An Autobiographical Story**. Avon, ISBN 0-380-78079-8, 298pp, trade paperback, cover by Bill Binger, \$12.50. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1996; follow-up to *Blood* and *Fabulous Harbours*; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 114; was there ever a British paperback edition of this? — if so, we haven't seen it.) December 1998.

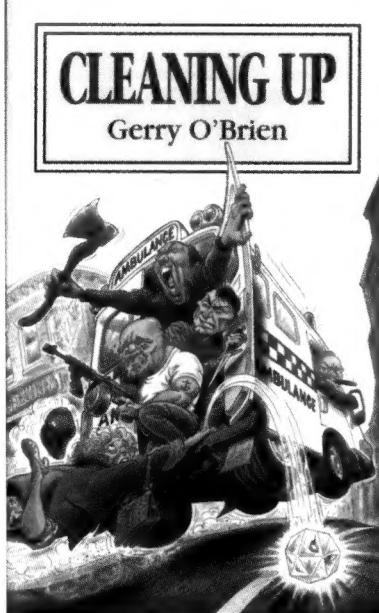
Muir, John Kenneth. **An Analytical Guide to Television's Battlestar Galactica**. McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-0441-8, x+234pp, hardcover, \$39.95. (Critical guide to the late-1970s sf TV series created by Glen A. Larson; first edition; this author, who has already perpetrated a book from the same publisher called *Exploring "Space 1999"* [1997], seems to be dedicating himself to memorializing between hard covers all the worst sf TV series ever made; don't McFarland publish books of literary interest any more?; or can they only find a market these days for studies of film and television shows, however trivial?; we would much rather see a blow-by-blow account of the complete published works of Poul Anderson, or Larry Niven, or whoever...) February 1999.

Nigg, Joseph, ed. **The Book of Fabulous Beasts: A Treasury of Writings from Ancient Times to the Present**. Oxford University Press, ISBN 0-19-509561-8, xx+408pp, hardcover, \$30. (Large-format illustrated anthology [or, more exactly, a commonplace-book] of writings, fictional and "non-fictional," on imaginary animals; first edition; attractively produced and chronologically arranged, it begins with ancient Mesopotamian and Homeric writings and proceeds through many Medieval and Renaissance extracts; among the more modern authors represented are Julian Barnes, Jorge Luis Borges, James Thurber, J. R. R. Tolkien and T. H. White; there are a glossary, bibliography and index; this is an American O.U.P. book, with no indication [as yet] of UK publication; recommended.) January 1999.

Noramly, Glenda. **Havenstar**. "Virgin Worlds." Virgin, ISBN 0-7535-0390-5, 490pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jon Sullivan, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; a debut novel by a new writer who "lives in Malaysia, where she works on conservation projects in the rainforest.") 18th March 1999.

Notkin, Debbie, and the Secret Feminist Cabal, eds. **Flying Cups & Saucers: Gender Explorations in Science Fiction and Fantasy**. Edgewood Press [PO Box 380264, Cambridge, MA 02238, USA], ISBN 0-9629066-8-9, xiii+394pp, trade paperback, cover by Freddie Baer, \$18. (Sf/fantasy anthology, first edition; it contains 13 reprint stories, all from the 1990s and selected by the judges of the Tiptree Award, by Eleanor Arnason, Carol Emshwiller, Graham Joyce & Peter F. Hamilton ["Eat Reeciebread," from *Interzone*], James Patrick Kelly, Ursula Le Guin, Ian McDonald, Ian R. MacLeod, R. Garcia y Robertson, Delia Sherman, Lisa Tuttle and others.) No date shown: received in December 1998.

O'Brien, Gerry. **Cleaning Up**. Colin Smythe [Gerrards Cross, Bucks. SL9 8XA], ISBN 0-86140-416-5, 256pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Ireland, no price shown. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; set in London, it's probably a debut novel by a new British writer; Colin Smythe, "the man who brought us Terry Pratchett," has been a literary agent and an occasional book-publisher for several decades now — pre-





sumably he is hoping he has come up with another Pratchett here.) No date shown: received in December 1998.

**Robb, J. D. *Vengeance in Death*.** "An Eve Dallas Investigation." Coronet, ISBN 0-340-67491-1, 357pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf/crime novel, first published in the USA, 1997; there was a Hodder & Stoughton UK hardcover in 1998 [not seen]; this appears to be the sixth in the series about a New York woman detective in the mid-21st century; we saw the first, *Naked in Death*, some three years ago, but were not sent any of the intervening four: their titles are *Glory in Death*, *Immortal in Death*, *Rapture in Death* and *Ceremony in Death*; "J. D. Robb" is a pseudonym of Nora Roberts [born 1950], who is the author of over 100 novels – mostly paperback-original romances.) 21st January 1999.

**Robinson, Kim Stanley. *The Martians*.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-225358-5, xiv+400pp, hardcover, cover by Peter Elson, £16.99. (Sf collection, first edition [?]; proof copy received; it consists of several new novellas and short stories, all set on the Red Planet, plus various background fillers and unpublished out-takes [including poems] from the author's now-classic Mars trilogy, *Red Mars* [1992], *Green Mars* [1993] and *Blue Mars* [1995]; there are no authorial introductions or explanatory notes: it's all presented "straight" to the reader; and could well have been entitled *The Martian Chronicles* [which, we venture to guess, was almost certainly the author's working title for this book in his own mind...].) 19th April 1999.

**Rosenberg, Joel. *The Crimson Sky: Keepers of the Hidden Ways, Book Three*.** Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-78932-9, 341pp, A-format paperback, \$5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; follow-up to *The Fire Duke* and *The Silver Stone*.) December 1998.

**Sawyer, Robert J. *Factoring Humanity*.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-651186-4, 348pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1998; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 135.) 4th January 1999.

**Shirley, Ian. *Shadowplay*.** Citron Press [Suite 155, Business Design Centre, 52 Upper Street, London N1 0QH], ISBN 0-7544-0052-2, 222pp, trade paperback, £6.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; a debut novel by a new British writer [born 1962], this is another product of the self-publishing "New Authors Co-Operative.") No date shown: received in December 1998.

**Silverberg, Robert. *Lord Prestimion: A Novel in the Majipoor Cycle*.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224678-3, 434pp, hardcover, cover by Jim Burns, £16.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first edition [?]; follow-up to *Lord Valentine's Castle* [1980], etc; it's dedicated to the cover artist, Jim Burns, "who has shown me how Majipoor really looks.") 1st February 1999.

**Sinclair, Alison. *Cavalcade*.** Millennium, 1-85798-532-X, 299pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Sf novel, first edition; Sinclair's third novel, following *Legacies* [1995] and *Blueheart* [1996].) 31st December 1998.

**Smith, Michael Marshall. *One of Us*.** Harper-Collins, ISBN 0-00-649997-X, 307pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1998; Smith's third novel, set in America in the near future; as with his earlier books, it's marketed primarily as a thriller for those who wouldn't be seen dead reading "sci-fi" or anything on HarperCollins's Voyager list; reviewed by David Mathew in *Interzone* 137.) 4th January 1999.

**Soister, John T. *Of Gods and Monsters: A Critical Guide to Universal Studios' Science Fiction, Horror and Mystery Films, 1929-1939*.** McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-0454-X,

x+395pp, hardcover, \$65. (Illustrated guide to Hollywood's most famous cycle of horror-fantasy films [few of them are actually sf], i.e. the products of Carl Laemmle's Universal Studios in the 1930s; first edition; this is one of McFarland's larger-format books, with a pictorial cover; the thoroughly-detailed and opinionated entries are arranged chronologically, which always seems the most sensible way to structure such books – so that they can be read as a "narrative"; recommended to movie buffs.) March 1999.

**Tattersall, Ian. *Becoming Human: Evolution and Human Uniqueness*.** Oxford University Press, ISBN 0-19-850472-1, 258pp, hardcover, no price shown. (Popular science text, first published in the USA, 1998; another book about the exciting "new paradigm" of human prehistory [well, not so new any more: it's been a-building for two or three decades now]; British-born Tattersall, who is a Curator at the American Museum of Natural History, is a well-informed commentator who marshals much valuable information; unfortunately, though, he doesn't have the gift of words – oh, for a 500-page book with this magnificent subject matter and Stephen Jay Gould's writing skills! [the imitable Gould himself has only touched on it in brief essays, to the best of our knowledge].) No date shown: received in December 1998.

**Turtledove, Harry. *The Great War: American Front*.** Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-71545-6, 503pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Crisp, £16.99. (Alternate-history sf novel, first published in the USA, 1998 [not "1999" as it states inside]; sequel to *How Few Remain* [1997].) 21st January 1999.

**Turtledove, Harry. *Into the Darkness*.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86895-2, 540pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; it's billed as the launch of "a major new fantasy series"; but the trouble with Turtledove, as we've said before, is that he's too sprawling and prolific to inspire confidence – much like his colleague L. E. Modesitt, Jr; this whopping tome follows unconnected others such as *Between the Rivers* [Tor, March 1998] and *The Great War: American Front* [Del Rey, June 1998]; does he really need to have three series on the go at the same time?; do all his books have to be 500 pages-plus?) April 1999.

**Verne, Jules. *The Chase of the Golden Meteor*.** Introduction by Gregory Benford. Bison

Books [University of Nebraska Press, PO Box 880484, Lincoln, NE 68588-0484, USA], ISBN 0-8032-9619-3, xii+292pp, trade paperback, £12.50. (Sf novel, first published in France as *La Chasse au météore*, 1908; a facsimile of the first English-language edition [London: Grant Richards, 1909], complete with well-reproduced illustrations [uncredited, but the artist's name appears to be Roux]; the translator is not named, but is likely to be Frederick Lawton; this is the American edition of October 1998 with a UK price and publication date added; the story concerns a meteor of solid gold which is pulled down to Earth by a mad scientist using a newly-invented "ray"; while the new Benford introduction is interesting [he argues for it as "hard sf"], it does not address the questions of the novel's publishing history and authenticity – did Jules Verne, who died in 1905, actually write it?; French scholars now believe that most of the posthumous Verne novels were at least partly by his son, Michel Verne [indeed, the previous year's title, *L'Agence Thompson et Co.* (1907), is thought to have been wholly by Michel], so the matter of authorship ought to have been raised: as it is, the publishers simply describe this novel, on the back cover, as "vintage Verne.") December 1998.

**Vinge, Vernor. *A Deepness in the Sky*.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85683-0, 605pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; sequel [or prequel] to the Hugo Award-winning *A Fire Upon the Deep*; it's one of the "truly great" sf novels, according to the publisher.) February 1999.

**Ware, Paul. *Beyond Freedom*.** New English Library, ISBN 0-340-68916-1, viii+376pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Crisp, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1998; the second book by a new Yorkshire-based British author; born 1960, whose first was entitled *Flight of the Mariner* [1997]; apparently there was a Hodder & Stoughton hardcover edition last year, but we never saw that; rather than being typical Big Commercial Fantasy in the now-traditional post-Tolkien mode, it seems to be a fantastic adventure romp which owes more to old pulp-magazine models such as Edgar Rice Burroughs's "Barsoom" yarns and Austin Hall & Homer Eon Flint's *The Blind Spot* [Argosy, 1921].) 21st January 1999.

**Webb, Don. *The Double: An Investigation*.** St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-19144-8, 242pp, hardcover, cover by Neil Shigley, \$22.95. (Crime novel by a well-known small-press sf/fantasy writer, first edition; according to the accompanying publisher's letter, "this one's truly weird" – well, it would be, wouldn't it, seeing as Don Webb wrote it?) Late entry: October publication, received in December 1998.

**Westfahl, Gary. *The Mechanics of Wonder: The Creation of the Idea of Science Fiction*.** "Liverpool Science Fiction Texts and Studies." Liverpool University Press, ISBN 0-85323-573-2, viii+344pp, C-format paperback, £14.95. (Critical study of the emergence of the sf genre, and in particular of the roles played by editors Hugo Gernsback and John W. Campbell; first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £32 [not seen]; this is Westfahl's major work to date – clearly written, polemical, and containing much to disagree with!) Late entry: November publication, received in December 1998.

**Note:** We have decided to abandon the separate "Spinoffery" list, consisting of "those sub-types of sf, fantasy and horror which may be termed novelizations, recursive fictions, spinoffs, sequels by other hands, shared worlds and sharecrops," since of late we have not been receiving a sufficient number of the relevant kinds of books. From now on, any such items received will be incorporated in the main listing, above.

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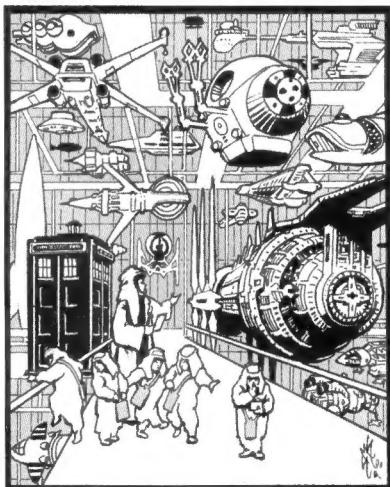
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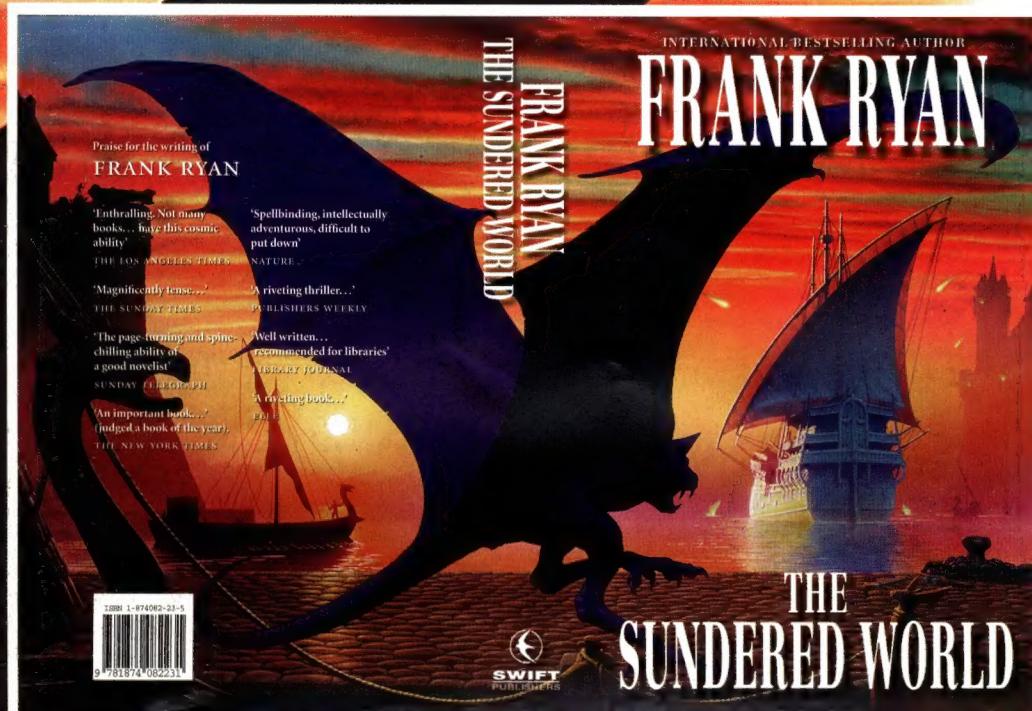
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